Exploring the use of emotional and personal development in supporting students in higher education

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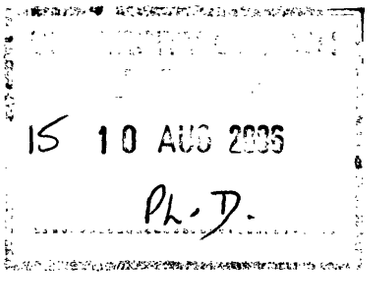
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ABSTRACT

The political agenda of widening access and increasing participation rates as a means of improving social equity has resulted in increasing numbers of non-traditional students entering higher education. However, widening access has been accompanied by rapidly falling retention rates, with non-traditional students at particular risk of non-completion.

Non-traditional students are generally perceived to have less experience or direct knowledge of the 'rules of the game' of higher education, and such cultural remoteness may contribute to their non-completion. Relaxing admissions policies in isolation appears unable to achieve social inclusion. The systems, ethos and structures within higher education may also need revision if non-traditional students are to be retained. A remedy may lie in providing 'better' support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to ensure their retention, since existing support approaches are based on a standard model of traditional students (white, middle class, school-leavers) which does not 'fit' the current diverse range of students and their needs. Without adequate student support and development programmes, many of these targeted non-traditional students may be at risk of being recruited into a system that is inadequately prepared to receive them. This situation leaves these students in an exposed and vulnerable position, which may compromise both their learning experiences and retention, and perhaps of more concern may damage their sense of self.

At the same time the traditional higher learning focus on knowledge and skills acquisition disproportionately emphasises cognitive development - to the detriment of other areas, particularly the personal and emotional components. Many theories support the importance of emotional and personal development in higher education as a complement to its current cognitive emphasis, but despite increasing calls for including emotions and personal development into higher education it remains a key neglected dimension, with the literature offering little guidance on how emotions might be practically integrated into the higher learning curriculum. As such, a gap between theory and practice is identified.

In response to this deficit, my research offers an integrated response by creating a programme of emotional and personal development, using person-centred psychotherapeutic principles, to provide a student support system relevant to the needs of contemporary students. I explore the impact of this programme on students' experiences of transition, learning-to-learn and retention within one particular higher education institution.

The overall research design lies within the person-centred philosophy which forms a theoretical framework that both underpins the research strategy and circumscribes the research field of personal development in university education. However, the development of the programme synthesises the principles of the person-centred approach to psychotherapy with related ideas from within the fields of education and learning to form a foundation to the research. Its development involved a continuous and iterative process which I engaged with in collaboration with the student participants in order to tailor the programme to their learning needs and to foster control and ownership of the programme amongst these students.

My research seeks to make a contribution within two key areas of the education field, namely, academic policy and higher education teaching, learning and support by providing a deep insight into the experiences of students within the current higher education system.

Key findings of the research suggest that this programme is able to facilitate the development of supportive relationships between students; encourage a deeper conception of learning; increase students' sense of belonging within the university; and enhance students' ability to take control of their learning and become actively engaged with, and responsible for it.

Through such learner development the programme is able to contribute towards the transition, learning-to-learn and retention of students – especially non-traditional students.

Chapter 1

Introduction

This research is concerned with understanding the learning experiences of students and seeks to develop and explore the effects of integrating a programme of emotional support and personal development within these learning experiences. The outcomes of this research therefore seek to contribute towards learning support strategies within the higher education sector that effectively assist the transition, learning and retention of students, particularly in relation to 'non-traditional' students. In addition it seeks to inform our understanding of the impact of the academic policy of widening access by providing an insight of the impact of this of the students' experience of higher education.

'Non-traditional' students is a general and informal term used within the higher education field typically used to refer to members of society who are currently under-represented within higher education as a function of social class, background, age and/or ethnicity. Official government documents (Select Committee on Education and Employment 2001) define it more carefully as "students from groups that are under-represented in higher education. These include mature students, students with disabilities, those from manual occupational backgrounds [first generation higher education entrants] and students entering via non A-level routes" (Medway, Rhodes, Macraes, Maguire and Gewirtz 2003:8). An earlier 1997 Institute for Employment Research at the University of Warwick (IERUW) report commissioned by the Higher Education Funding Council for England similarly defines non-traditional students as having one of the following characteristics:-

- coming from an ethnic minority background
- having a long-term disability
- possessing non-standard (A-level) qualifications on entry to higher education
- aged over 25 years on entry to university
- from a lower socio-economic group of origin.

For the purposes of my research the definition of non-traditional students as outlined above by the 1997 IERUW report is used. My research contends that existing support strategies (e.g. one-to-one personal tutoring) within higher education have been largely designed for and suited to the needs of traditional students (those from the predominant demographic as white, middle-class school-leavers). However, higher education is changing. It is becoming a much more commercialised and vocationalised sector that is no longer restricted to an academic elite. Its doors are being eased open in response to a political agenda that demands greater social inclusion. These change processes are being driven, not by academia itself, but by political forces which are challenging the access policies of higher education to offer more social equity, by encouraging a wider range of students, in terms of age, social status, and ethnicity, (non-traditional students) into higher education.

Admitting non-traditional students is only the first step of inclusion. It is clearly important that once admitted these students are appropriately supported and enable to engage with higher learning if they are to achieve their full learning potential. However, the current drive for social inclusion has been practically interpreted into a widening access agenda that has focused primarily on the recruitment of students into university - in terms of encouraging the admission of non-traditional students. Given that many non-traditional students may have little or no direct or indirect experience or knowledge of the higher education environment and as such be unfamiliar with the ethos and curriculum of higher education and largely unaware of its' established practices and structures. Such students are frequently described within the sociological literature as being distanced or remote from higher education in a cultural sense (Bourdieu 1977; Reay, Davies, David and Ball 2001; Grenfell and James 1998) from the structures and systems operating within higher education. These students, therefore, have few, if any, opportunities to develop realistic expectations of higher learning and their role within it.

Recent studies demonstrate that in the contemporary higher education climate many students are struggling to remain within the higher education system and subsequently withdrawal rates have remained high. The Higher Education Statistics Agency report withdrawal rates of 15 per cent across the UK sector of 14.1 per cent for the 2001 intake (BBC: 2004). Further research reveals that a significant proportion of

withdrawing students are non-traditional, establishing a clear link between increasing numbers of such students and rising non-completion rates (Paul 2001; Smith 2002; Bennett 2003; Hall, May and Shaw 2000). In addition sector benchmarks demonstrate that principally 'new' universities have responded to the government's call for greater social equity amongst higher learning participants (Reay, Davies, David and Ball 2001; Collins 1999). It is therefore unsurprising that 'new' universities (former polytechnics that gained university status after 1992 when the binary divide between polytechnics and universities was removed) that enrol greater proportions of non-traditional students, typically also have higher student attrition rates (SCEE 2001). As a result massification of higher education, brought about by relaxing admissions policies, appears to have done little to improve the level of social equity within a system that may neither be designed for, nor adapting to the needs of non-traditional students.

Furthermore, existing student support approaches are criticised within the teaching and learning literature (Hall *et al* 2000; Connor, Pearson, Court and Jagger 1996) finding them to be based on a standard model of traditional students (white, middle class, school-leavers) which does not 'fit' the current diverse range of students and their needs. Such studies raise some difficult ethical and practical issues for higher education since the physical recruitment of non-traditional students is merely the starting point of inclusive higher education. Without adequate student support and development programmes many of these targeted non-traditional students are at risk of being recruited into a system that is inadequately prepared to receive them. This situation leaves these students in an exposed and vulnerable position, which may compromise both their learning experiences and retention, and perhaps of more concern may damage their sense of self. What is apparent is that widening access requires more than relaxing admissions policies - which is merely the first stage of social inclusion - and precipitates a deeper need to redesign the student support system.

Moreover, in addition to the particular difficulties experienced by non-traditional students, most students entering undergraduate programmes have little or no personal experience of studying at higher education level, many having come directly from school or sixth-form college. However, studying at the higher level can be somewhat

different in nature and approach from what has been previously experienced and is typically characterised by:

- low levels of class contact hours, typically 2 or 3 hours/week per subject in the form of lectures, tutorials and workshops.
- requirement to read and study most material outside of the formal teaching arena.
- use of more open and independent learning systems – e.g. reading around the subject is encouraged; no formal attendance requirement.
- individual learners are required to take responsibility for structuring their learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies.
- emphasis is placed on student-centred learning, where the student is encouraged to be an active participant, as opposed to passive recipient in the learning process.
- move away from provision of an objectivist 'right answers' approach towards discussion of diversity, development of critical thinking skills and the emergence of subjective personal ideas, opinions and growth.
- tutors' role becomes that of a facilitator of study rather than its director.

This often represents a very different approach to learning than that which a student may be familiar with. As a result students may struggle with the transition that needs to be made from the more supportive and directive modes of learning they are familiar with to more autonomous and self-directed higher learning behaviour.

The response of most institutions to this transition issue is to provide induction programmes. These normally take place over a couple of days at the start of the first year of higher learning. They typically include orientation events, and provide students with a raft of information concerning the practicalities of studying e.g. available facilities, administrative issues, timetabling and the availability of study and other support services. Because this information provision is concentrated within the first few days, students are often overloaded with information and advice and at risk of not assimilating or understanding the relevance of it. Furthermore, short, induction programmes that are restricted to providing factual information have a cognitive focus

that may not be effective at creating or supporting the longer-term development of student entrants into adept higher learners.

As well as the existence of the ethical arguments for continued support of students as they enter higher education there are also some powerful, persuasive measures in terms of the increasing use of performance indicators within the sector. Such measures encompass issues of social inclusion and student retention and the collected data is used to measure the relative performance of universities. Despite the wider debate surrounding the appropriateness of using such measures of performance (see Roper, Ross and Thomson 2000; Taylor 2001), their existence is evident and, moreover, the results are widely reported through the established press. Consequently, failure to provide appropriate support for students from both traditional but especially non-traditional backgrounds may compromise a university's public standing within these league tables. As such, the need for effective programmes of student support and development is further intensified in terms of preserving or improving an institution's standing within these published tables.

There is a general agreement within the literature that a remedy may lie in providing 'better' support for students who suffer disadvantage to ensure their retention within higher education (DfEE 2000a; Paul 2001; Smith 2002; Bennett 2003; SCEE 2001; Hall *et al* 2000). Disadvantage has been defined as "a set of difficulties preventing people from participating fully in society, including poverty but also, for example , limiting factors in one's life situation (such as lack of skills), unequal levels of health and well-being associated with economic disadvantage and discrimination" (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2003:4). What is required is the type of support that facilitates transition, enhances learning experiences, stimulates engaged learning in a way that ultimately strengthens students' academic performance and personal development and secures their retention. However, as yet there is little research to suggest what the practical nature or format of such 'better' support should be and as such no conclusive guidance currently exists on how best it may be achieved.

As such, a first and important gap within the higher education literature is exposed, namely: What is the nature and structure of a 'better' student support system and how

might such a system be practically developed and integrated to provide appropriate and meaningful support that responds to the needs of current students?

My research seeks to address this gap in knowledge and understanding by aiming to develop and integrate a programme of relevant, proactive support that extends beyond the phases of recruitment and induction, to facilitate the transition and meaningful engagement of students with their studies.

In addition to the gap in understanding in relation to student support identified above, most of the literature on teaching and learning focuses on its cognitive or thinking aspects with emotions remaining a key neglected dimension. Whilst the importance of cognition is acknowledged, increasingly (within the feminist, neurobiological, teaching and learning and psychology literature) the significance of other emotional and personal aspects of learning, such as self-awareness, personal responsibility, self-esteem, empathy and managing feelings and relationships, are also being recognised as important in terms of maximising learning potential (Birgerstam 2002; Boler 1999; Palombo Weiss 2000; Mann 2001; Gracia and Jenkins 2002; Hargreaves 1998). These writers examine the role of emotional and personal components within learning. A review of such research reveals a number of strong arguments for the general inclusion of emotions and their development within higher education with some alluding to the support role that emotions may play in facilitating transition and supporting retention within higher education. However, what is largely absent within this literature is an exploration and discussion of how emotions and their development can be practically and usefully integrated into the higher education experience.

As such a second gap is identified within the literature, namely: How can emotions and personal development be practically integrated into higher education and what would its impact be on students' experience of higher learning?

My research brings together these two identified gaps in knowledge and understanding – the need for 'better' student support and the need to include an emotional dimension in higher education - and offers a combined response by seeking to develop a 'better' student support system *through* emotional and personal

development. The use of emotions and personal development in supporting students is an important and overlooked area within the literature.

My research progresses to explore the impact of an emotionally-focused means of support on students' experience of transition, learning-to-learn and retention within higher education. As such I attempt to contribute to the development of improved transition, learning and retention strategies within higher education especially in relation to non-traditional students who are the specific target of policies to increase participation and achieve greater social equity within higher education.

In addition, student experiences lie at the heart of this research which is important since most of the research on the impact of the widening access agenda is being undertaken from the perspective of the government and its agencies, the higher education institutions themselves, employers, sociologists and economists. Whilst there has been some research into the impact of this policy on the students themselves and their learning experiences (HEFCW: 2005), it remains an under-explored area. As such my research may also provide needed insights into the experience of being a student within the current climate of higher education.

Research Aims

My study addresses the following research questions:

- How can a structured programme of emotional and personal development that draws on person-centred psychotherapy principles be integrated into contemporary higher education?

- What is the impact of such a programme on the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to their transition into the university environment, their learning development and their orientation towards remaining or withdrawing from higher education?

Throughout the research I focus on illuminating the role that emotion can play in the integration of individuals into the higher education environment. This exploration particularly focuses on the issues of student transition, and retention within higher education from the perspective of non-traditional students. It also seeks to support the process of learning-to-learn where students progress towards higher and autonomous patterns of learning. Again, it concentrates on understanding the experiences of non-traditional students, who as a group are increasingly becoming specific recruitment targets.

Importance and contribution of the research

The importance of this research is suggested as follows:

- It seeks to address the insufficient understanding of the impact of widening access on the experiences of non-traditional students.
- In response to an identified gap in the literature, it aims to develop a programme of student support that is appropriate to the needs of non-traditional students within contemporary higher education, assisting their cultural adaptation, transition and retention.
- It attempts to bridge the gap identified in the literature between the cognitive and emotional aspects of higher education and focuses on developing the emotional aspect as an important partner and catalyst to higher learning.
- It supports the drive to achieve greater social equity by concentrating on retaining students once they have secured access.
- It explores the use of person-centred therapeutic principles within the field of higher education.
- It offers insight into the individual experiences of students, which may be of interest to both educators and policy advisers.

The contribution of my research seeks to lie within two key areas of the education field, namely:

1 Academic policy – widening access and increasing participation rates

The literature is short on analyses of the effects of widening access and the impact of support programmes on student experiences of transition, learning and retention. Exploring the effect of my programme on student experiences of these issues enables insights into its impact on facilitating student transition (cultural adaptation) into higher education, developing personal responsibility for learning (higher learning) and supporting retention. It could be argued that since my research collects experiential data, which prioritises the individual, any findings do not directly translate into the policy arena, which operates at a macro or systemic level. However, despite policy-makers being engaged at the strategic level the impact of policy is felt at all levels within an organisation. Students and their learning experiences remain at the heart of the day-to-day existence of higher education institutions and as such are an important consideration during the policy formulation process. Given students' centrality to the existence of higher education institutions, such deep experiential student data may be one of the most important sources of data on institutional effects. By capturing the detailed experiences of non-traditional students, my study may provide some insight into the possible impact of higher education widening access policy on such students. Therefore, I would contend that insights into student experiences at the sharp end do hold relevance for the needs of policy makers within higher education.

2 Higher education teaching, learning and support

My research addresses the literature gaps identified earlier by creating a programme of emotional development, relevant to the needs of current students. The design of the programme is specifically informed by the theoretical literature concerning emotions, student support and retention within higher education. As such, through its implementation, my study contributes to the understanding of the development of appropriate support and retention strategies within higher education. The key principles of my programme (and differences from existing support strategies) include its:

- foundation within person-centred psychotherapy principles

- student-led or "bottom-up" approach that fosters student control
- voluntary, pro-active nature
- group structure - experiences are shared enhancing the development of self-awareness and dissolving isolation
- emphasis on personal and emotional development, enhancing self-understanding and the ability to derive personal solutions/actions that 'fit' individuals
- promotion of active self-responsibility - eliminating inappropriate tutor 'hand-holding' and passive dependency
- relevance to the actual needs of, rather than predetermined perceived needs of students
- contemporaneous nature, being embedded within the teaching and learning timeframe.

Limitations obviously exist on the extent of the contribution that my research can make in this area. The programme is implemented within a single institution, with a limited number of students from a particular academic discipline. This is necessary in order to work within a psychotherapeutic framework that demands close emotional involvement and deep interactions. Whilst this is not problematic when considering individual's subjective experiences (in fact it is desirable since it enhances the richness of the experiential data collected) it is not possible to easily generalise findings to wider populations.

Additionally, the person-centred approach – though the most widely used counselling approach in both the UK and the US – is not suited to the needs of every individual from every culture or background. Other approaches e.g. behavioural techniques, may offer greater potential for development amongst some individuals.

Undertaking personal development work also has training and therefore resource implications for tutors who are willing to engage in such activities with students. Whilst this may represent a resourcing constraint, if pressure to achieve social equity across a wider range of institutions increases this may mitigate such constraint.

Notwithstanding these limitations my research may also be of benefit to the world-wide community of academics engaged in the education of students; pastoral tutors and retention advisors working with students; professional counsellors charged with the personal care of students within the higher education arena; higher education policy-makers; institutional advisors to higher education; and perhaps most importantly, the student body itself.

The Theoretical Framework and Research Ethos

My research lies within the field of education – specifically higher education but places its focus on the contribution that personal and emotional development might make within higher learning. As such it has a composite theoretical framework in that it is structured and directed by the findings of the literature review of two main fields namely, higher learning, and emotional and personal development. This recognises that learning is a complex phenomenon and therefore not limited to a single perspective. Related ideas across the two fields are synthesised to form a coherent theoretical framework within which the personal development programme is created and implemented. I also draw on understanding, issues and ideas from the fields of sociology and psychology to support such integration.

The emotional and personal development aspects are integrated into the support system using the principles and philosophy of person-centred psychotherapy. This approach conceptualises learning as a fundamental human activity, that begins at the start of life and has the potential to continue - to a lesser or greater extent - throughout the entire span of an individual's life. Learning is therefore a truly lifelong process that has a natural and spontaneous character. It engages all parts of the human psyche, including the intellectual, behavioural, sensorimotor and emotional realms of human being, and as such possesses a holistic sphere of influence. Such holistic learning has the power to engage the individual in a powerful and meaningful encounter that has the potential to change an individual's perception or understanding of the world around him/her and of the self-within.

Unfortunately, higher learning may currently be failing to use such a holistic approach – preferring to allow the intellectual or cognitive realm of learning to dominate. Such cognitive dominance may be a consequence of the historical development of higher education, which was largely driven by the need for skills and knowledge acquisition.

Despite the body of developing evidence supporting the beneficial impact of integrating emotions and their development into learning, it remains a challenging and under-explored area for academia. Thus a current disparity between theory and practice within higher education is identified. This has the potential to create an unbalanced and weakened form of learning, the experience of which may leave many students feeling isolated and detached from their learning, bored by its one-dimensional stimulus that fails to engage the whole person in the learning process. Importantly, a cognitive focus appears to exacerbate the already problematic transition that non-traditional students have to make into higher education. The culture shock of arriving at the doors of an unfamiliar, institution is difficult enough. Add to this the realisation that there is little accessible and meaningful support available to overcome any difficulties and it is hardly surprising that some students do not even make it to the end of their first term of study. As such, methods and approaches to facilitate emotional and personal development need to be explored and advanced in order to bridge this gap.

Furthermore, the repercussions of neglecting the emotional dimension within higher learning may also compromise a student's ability to learning. Studies suggest (see More 1974; Leach and Moon 1999) that many students (both traditional and non-traditional) respond to a disproportionate cognitive dominance that lacks emotionality, by limiting their engagement with and restricting their approach towards higher learning. Students' conception of learning may become restricted to focus on negotiating the series of academic assessment obstacles they encounter and their learning becomes concentrated on the narrow tracts of subject matter that are directly assessed. Additionally, the learning agenda is arguably becoming increasingly externally dictated by government and its agencies. The internal world of the student (regardless of their social status) is largely ignored, which may result in rising levels of student disaffection that impair learning. Persistent issues with the level of student withdrawals is perhaps symptomatic of some of these problems students are

experiencing. Focusing on the personal and emotional aspects of learning as important partners and catalysts in the higher education experience, as occurs within my study, may begin to redress and restore the balance of learning within higher education.

By adapting and integrating techniques and approaches from the counselling arena my research is predominantly structured and supported by a theoretical framework that lies within the person-centred approach to counselling and psychotherapy. It borrows the philosophy and techniques of the person-centred approach and transports them into the field of personal development within higher education. This person-centred ethos pervades all aspects of the research, including the creation, content and nature of the development programme itself; data-collection (where semi-structured interviews that use self-reflective techniques are used) and data-analysis, where a person-centred perspective is used to explore the meaning contained within the personal experiences of students. This lends a consistent and coherent theoretical approach throughout the research.

In addition this study recognises that personal development is generally a relatively slow and incremental process that takes place over time. As such it has a longitudinal aspect to it, in that it records the experiences of students across the early months of their first year of academic study. This enables a fuller understanding of the developmental processes as they occur.

The Context of Higher Education

Understanding is drawn from the subjective learning experiences of students which are the primary sources of data within the research. Because of their centrality they are collected *in situ* i.e. within the higher education arena as the learning takes place. This also recognises the importance of the learning context as an intrinsic component or backdrop to the learning experiences of individuals. As such the influence of the contemporary context of higher education, especially in regard to the challenges of widening access and increasing participation rates, is an integral part of the research.

Widening access policies have had a number of impacts on higher education, one of which is that it has changed the nature and composition of the scholastic community. The student population is larger and more diverse in terms of culture, ethnicity, social status and age. There are changes in the student profile in terms of those who remain living at home whilst at university, those who are employed as well as studying, and those who have childcare or other domestic and social responsibilities. In addition, there is also a drive towards anonymity within the educational process - fuelled in part by the external scrutiny of the sector - and exacerbated by increasing class sizes and rising staff-to-student ratios. The impact of such heterogeneity and massification is inevitably included and discussed within my research findings since these contextual issues are an integral part of, and as such inevitably colour, students' learning experiences and perceptions.

The remainder of this chapter briefly outlines the structure of my thesis as follows:

Chapter 2 reviews the literature in the areas that are pertinent to the research. This covers three principal fields - theories of higher learning, the role of emotions in higher learning and the use of person-centred psychotherapy tools as a means of effecting personal and emotional development amongst higher education students.

Chapter 3 considers the socio-political context of the research in terms of the current structure and changes that are taking place within higher education. It identifies the principal current changes as those of rapid massification of the sector, and alterations to the student funding structure. The chapter progresses to consider the impact of such changes on the students and their higher education experiences.

Chapter 4 discusses the creation and implementation of the personal and emotional development programme used within my research to support students. It considers the application of the core tenets of the person-centred approach to the higher education arena and describes how they are used to construct and deliver this personal development programme.

Chapter 5 details the research design of the thesis. It discusses the person-centred philosophy as the theoretical framework that underpins the overall research strategy

and describes the practical implementation of the personal development programme. It also considers the use and appropriateness of the case study approach within the wider research design. The chapter concludes by introducing the student participants within the research via opening descriptive vignettes. These provide a brief introductory insight into the subjective lives of each of the participants.

Chapter 6 describes the collation and analysis of the data and discusses the findings of the research in relation to the principal research questions. Discussion focuses on the students' perceptions and experiences of transition, retention and learning-to-learn and includes their perceptions both before and after the personal development programme is undertaken. Key issues, themes, patterns and dilemmas are discussed in relation to the individual student experience and the wider context of higher education.

Chapter 7 draws together the main findings of my research into a series of conclusions, focusing on my research questions and summarises the contribution my study makes to the higher education field given the confines of the limitations of my study.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

As discussed in the introduction, this thesis is concerned with the creation and implementation delivery of a personal and emotional development programme and the subsequent exploration of its impact on students' experiences of transition, learning-to-learn and retention.

This chapter explores the relevant literature and establishes the importance of emotions and personal development in higher education and learning and hence the need to develop mechanisms to support and facilitate this form of development. The literature review examines discussions and findings across a range of subjects (including education, learning, psychology and psychotherapy) and synthesises related ideas to form a foundation to the research. The chapter is therefore structured as follows:

Firstly it explores the development of higher education and reveals how the current learning focus on knowledge and skills acquisition may disproportionately emphasise cognitive development - to the detriment of other areas, particularly the personal and emotional components of learning. It subsequently discusses the theoretical understanding of higher learning and exposes the disparity between many of these theories of higher learning (that support the importance of emotional and personal development in higher education) and the current cognitive learning emphasis. As such, a gap between theory and practice is identified. The chapter lastly reveals that little has been written about how best to undertake, integrate or support emotional development within the contemporary higher learning arena. In response to this deficit I explore the use and applicability of person-centred psychotherapy principles as a means of supporting personal and emotional development in higher education and thereby bridge the identified gap between theory and practice. This bridge is specifically discussed in relation to supporting learning-to-learn (which underpins transition and retention in higher education) by stimulating personal responsibility for study as a necessary precursor of developing patterns of autonomous, higher learning.

Understanding the current cognitive emphasis in higher education

To understand the dominance of intellectual or cognitive development in higher education it is necessary to go back somewhat in time to consider its historical origins. The genesis of higher education can be traced back to the Ancient civilisations, especially that of Greece, where the approach towards higher learning was more holistic in that it considered the logical or thinking aspect – *logos* – together with the emotional or feeling aspect – *pathos*. Moreover, "Greek philosophers...encourage[d] the individual to be in touch with and cultivate their emotions" (Antonacopoulou and Gabriel 2001:441). Indeed, the relationship between thinking and feeling has, since the time of Socrates (469 – 399 BC), Plato (427 – 347 BC) and Aristotle (384 – 322 BC), been an important philosophical consideration.

However, the emergence of an institution of higher learning, within the UK, lies in medieval times. Its primary function at that time was the training and therefore maintenance of the clericy which resulted in the establishment in England of the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, during the thirteenth century. Their creation was forged largely from the need to provide a source of literate scholars to undertake the commercial and private affairs of the upper ranks of society. Given this vocational nature it appears likely that their principal focus was on knowledge-based or cognitive areas. As these institutions developed over time and beyond vocational needs, the curricular emphasis was also broadened. However, such broadening did not extend to include the emotional or personal dimensions as curricula continued to focus and drive learning exclusively in terms of the promotion of thought, knowledge and skills acquisition.

Barnett (1990) describes how Oxford and Cambridge remained the sole seats of higher learning in England for nearly 700 years until the establishment in 1828 of a non-conformist University College in London. This was quickly followed by more traditional religious foundations in the Strand (Kings College 1829) and Durham (1832). Higher education continued to expand slowly during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries, until the 1960's when their growth became more rapid, as a result of the creation of numerous polytechnics and colleges of higher education

that were publicly funded (Barnett 1990). However, despite periods of change in recent decades which included the move towards a more liberal higher education focus, the current government intervention into higher education and its more explicit linkages to the economic wellbeing and competitiveness of the nation have driven its focus towards skills acquisition. As such the emphasis of higher education on knowledge and skills acquisition, technical competencies and intellectual development remains present.

A detailed description of the genesis and development of higher education is beyond the scope of this research - which is primarily concerned with the current situation within higher education - the point is that their existence has prioritised the cognitive skills of knowledge, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. As such cognition has a lengthy and traditional emphasis within higher education. Therefore, and perhaps somewhat unsurprisingly, higher learning has a deeply entrenched and relationship with 'thinking' that has been cultivated over many centuries.
The principal purpose of contemporary higher education remains concentrated on intellectual development, particularly the development of critical thinking (Barnett 1994). Such elevation of the intellect is clearly not a recent phenomenon and stems from the teachings of Aristotle (Heron, 1988), who perceived intellect and the capacity to reason to be what differentiated mankind from other animals. As such its development was critical, since it lay at the heart of what it is to be a 'higher human'. This has given rise to a widely accepted "...hierarchical model of the person with the intellect at its pinnacle – in effect the Platonic position of the intellect ruling the nobler emotions, which in turn rule the baser passions" (Rawson 2000: 230). Steiner (1997: 20) suggests that "...the dominance of this rational form of cognition has been reinforced and perpetuated in more contemporary times through..." Such cognitive primacy has given rise to what Mezirow describes as "...the Western rationalistic tradition...[or] the objectivist paradigm of learning." (1998: 2)

This principal focus is reflected in the concentration of a large body of literature on higher learning being directed towards the cognitive, rational and logical aspects of learning. These are discussed in conjunction with other learning theories in the section that follows.

Theories of Learning and their Relationship to Higher Learning

Learning is typically defined in the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "...acquiring knowledge of or skill in by study, experience or instruction." This succinct definition reinforces the cognitive knowledge-based view of learning and as such conceals the true complexity and depth of human learning. It is unsurprising therefore that this simplistic definition is far from universally accepted. The early behavioural psychologists - including Pavlov (1849-1936), Thorndyke (1874-1949) and Skinner (1904-1990) - viewed learning in terms of its impact on behaviour. They suggested that learning could be defined and measured by relatively permanent changes in behaviour brought about by experience and reflection on that experience.

Early learning theories emerged from this field of behavioural psychology, which strongly favoured a scientific approach to learning. This resulted in a somewhat mechanistic understanding of the nature of learning. Edward L. Thorndyke was an early learning theorist who held that the most basic form of learning was 'trial-and-error' learning, which occurred in an incremental rather than insightful way – i.e. learning occurs in very small systematic steps. Despite working primarily with cats Thorndike held that the laws of learning were the same for all animals including humans. "These simple, semi-mechanical phenomena...which animal learning discloses, are the fundamentals of human learning also." (Thorndyke 1913:16)

This position suggests that learner behaviour has little to do with personal factors or intrinsic motivation and is largely driven by factors external to the learner. The historic and current knowledge acquisition climate within higher education appears to encourage the use of these external drivers of learning behaviour. Institutions dominate the control of what is learned through curricula design, when and where it is learned through timetabling procedures, how it is learned through teaching delivery, and the effectiveness of the learning via tutor assessments including examinations. All these are external to the student who is effectively stripped of the opportunity to control and develop meaningful relationships with their learning. It is perhaps understandable that, within such an authoritarian climate of higher learning, many students may respond by becoming semi-mechanistic in their approach to learning.

Thorndike was heavily criticised for taking such a deterministic approach to his study of human learning. He effectively reduced human learning to a series of automatic reactions to the environment that ignored the influence or impact of - amongst other phenomena - thinking, emotion, planning and intuition.

Similar criticisms are levied at other influential psychologists within the behavioural field including B. F. Skinner. Skinner developed the scientific philosophy termed 'radical behaviourism' and was "...steadfast in his insistence that psychologists should avoid theorising, especially about cognitive events (including language), and be content with descriptive accounts of behaviour." (Hergenhahn and Olson 2001:117)

Skinner held that learning was most effective if it took place in small steps, at the learners pace, with prompt feedback on progress. He incorporated these 3 principles of learning into a teaching technique known as Programmed Learning. Skinner argued that such learning was best achieved by using a teaching machine rather than a human tutor. Although controversial at the time this aspect of Skinner's work is evident in education programmes today (including higher education courses) that make use of computer software – e.g. Computer-Aided-Learning. Many interactive and stand-alone software packages exist to take students step-by-step through a topic which allows students to work at their own pace and provides regular feedback on progress. Such learning has received mixed reviews. Some authors have praised its effectiveness (Schramm 1964) whilst others are critical of its mechanistic approach that ignores the humanity of students, including Keller (1968) and Sherman (1992). Moreover, it has been shown that there is a tendency for the learned behaviour patterns fostered by programmed learning to be gradually displaced with innate behavioural patterns – a process described as 'instinctual drift' (Breland and Breland 1961). What appears to be fostered by such mechanistic and externally controlled modes of learning are short-term, shallow patterns of surface learning, stemming from a Skinnerian philosophy of learning that is limited to what Hergenhahn *op cit* describes as "...an accumulation of behavioural phenomenon rather than a deeper understanding of learning and motivation." (2001: 117) This perspective has a pronounced emphasis on the scientific aspect of learning which omits what it is to be human within the learning experience. Such criticisms, most significantly the failure

to acknowledge the role of cognition and emotion in learning, challenge the fundamental assumptions of behaviourism and arguably undermine behavioural understanding of human learning.

In response to these limitations the field of cognitive psychology developed and offered an alternative view of learning. Estes (1960) was one of the first theorists who changed the direction of learning theory, moving it towards a cognitive field. Other cognitive psychologists were quick to follow and Harlow (1905 – 1981) began undertaking work on the learning process. He undertook studies with monkeys and discrimination problems, finding that the more problems the monkeys solved, the better they became at solving them. The monkeys were clearly demonstrating what we would now describe as learning-to-learn, i.e. metacognition a concept described by Flavell (1979) as a form of self-intelligence – the ability to regulate and controls one's cognitive processes. Harlow understood learning to be a process (as opposed to a behavioural outcome) where progress is slow at first and many errors are made. As learning progresses the level of improvement builds and later learning is more rapid because it is based on previously learned strategies that can be effectively applied to the current problem. Such findings are consistent with the broader view of human learning as an active and developmental process that with appropriate exposure and support becomes increasingly developed and sophisticated i.e. capable of moving onto higher levels.

Further examples of the work of cognitive psychologists include the highly influential work of Piaget (1896 – 1980) - "...the giant in the field of cognitive theory"[1] who conceptualised learning within a cognitive framework. He modelled child development and learning as being a consequence of increasingly complex mental activities. As such Piaget also held a developmental view of learning suggesting that children's cognitive understanding (mental schemata) expand in response to accommodating new experiences. Interestingly, other researchers including Hecht and Proffitt (1995) have shown that experience does not necessarily lead to learning in adults. Despite this, Piaget viewed optimal learning as occurring under mildly challenging experiences (cognitive dissonance) that allowed the learner to both assimilate and accommodate the information and thus create intellectual growth.

1. www.time.com/time/time100/scientist/profile/piaget03.html

Piaget's work has been criticised for its use of predetermined and ordered stages of development (as opposed to Harlow's *op cit* more fluid view of cognitive development) and its failure to incorporate cultural diversity into his studies in terms of its participants.

Others including Bruner (1996), Dewey (1938) and Ryle (1949) share the broad conception of learning as reliant on cognitive structures in terms of mental models or schemas and reinforce the primary importance of cognition in relation to the learning process. Such views of learning continue to largely ignore the role of emotions, mood (affect) or feelings and as such restrict a fuller understanding of learning. Vygotsky (1962:10) suggests that this is a major failing within the field of psychology: "When we approach the problem of the interrelation between thought and language and other aspects of the mind, the first question that arises is that of intellect and affect. Their separation as subjects of study is a major weakness of traditional psychology."

A further branch of psychology – Gestalt (sometimes referred to as phenomenology) – developed an experiential perspective of learning. It built on the earlier ideas of learning, still placing it within a broad cognitive field, but being informed and developed through psychological experiences. This is consistent with Kolb's (1984) view of experiential learning as a process, which creates knowledge through the transformation of experience. Gestalt like other cognitively based theories rejects the behaviourist view of learning in favour of a whole person approach that focuses on the personal, meaningful and subjective experiences and perceptions of individuals. This is commonly referred to as insight learning (Kohler 1925) where instead of being a continuous process, learning occurs in sudden leaps. Insight learning is durable, persisting for considerable periods of time and is readily applied to other problems mainly because the original 'solutions' have originated from the learner themselves – and as such individuals have constructed their own meaning. Insight learning assigns an active role to the brain (as opposed to the behaviourist view of the brain as a passive receptor of stimuli that produce responses). Here the brain undertakes meaningful and organised activity to actively abstract or construct meaning from a range of stimuli – i.e. it seeks out rational interpretations and explanations.

Wertheimer (1880 – 1943) was a strong advocate of Gestalt or experiential learning. He compared learning outcomes based on rote memorisation with problem-based learning based on Gestalt principles. He held that memorisation or rote learning usually occurred in the absence of understanding and was rigid, forced, easily forgotten and offered limited applicability to other circumstances. Gestalt learning in contrast originates from within the individual, is rich in meaning and understanding, is easily generalisable and persistent over long periods of time. Wertheimer also held that certain teaching methods actually restricted understanding, specifically teaching that stressed the importance of logic, and teaching based on drill, memorisation and external reinforcement. Interestingly, higher learning often falls into this category, where emphasis is placed on the skills of logic and student performance is largely assessed via external methods – particularly examinations that rely heavily on memorisation techniques. Wertheimer concluded that learning effected through such teaching strategies was of poor quality in comparison to insight learning.

The literature thus far demonstrates recognition that learning is a complex phenomenon, which is traditionally viewed as involving changes in knowledge, skills, understanding and attitudes achieved through practice and experience together with reflection upon that experience. However, whilst the importance of cognition is acknowledged, increasingly the significance of other emotional and personal aspects of learning, such as self-awareness, personal responsibility, self-esteem, empathy and managing feelings and relationships, are also being recognised. This is a view expressed by Birgerstam: "In the university world the development of knowledge is generally too rational in the wrong way. Consequently students are being insufficiently prepared for the concrete and complex life outside the university...we need to learn to use our impressions, hunches and feelings." (2002: 431) The role of these other emotional and personal phenomena is viewed, within this research, as particularly pertinent to higher learning.

The first part of the literature review has therefore focused on key perspectives concerning learning generally. The next sections of the review progressed to consider learning approaches and conceptions that are relevant to higher education.

Learning in Higher Education

Higher education participants comprise an increasingly eclectic mix of adults and young adults who have 'chosen' to continue and develop their education. As such there is a general expectation that they are willing learners who will adopt an active stance or approach to their learning.

A learning approach describes how a student relates to their learning and broadly speaking two different learning approaches – a deep approach and a surface approach were initially identified by Ramsden (1987). Within higher learning a general link and consensus was established that related the deep approaches to high quality learning outcomes – in terms of the level of understanding abstracted or constructed – and surface approaches leading to poor quality learning outcomes. Mann (2001:7) summarises the characteristics of the surface approach as being "...rote learning, memorisation and reproduction, a lack of reflection and a preoccupation with completing the task." The learner is therefore passive, disengaged from their learning in terms of their being and feelings, and externalise the responsibility for their learning outcomes – usually onto tutors. However, Mann *op cit* is equally critical of the deep or strategic learning approach since although the learner is "...*actively* undertaking perceived requirements...to fulfil their own desires for success, [this] does not allow them to engage their own being and desires in relation to the subject of study itself, and locates control for their engagement in the perceived demands and criteria for success of external others." (2001: 7) As such she holds that both approaches 'alienate' the student from the process of study itself. This highlights the complexity of an individual's learning approach. It is not as simple as suggesting that a surface approach is passive and therefore leads to poor quality learning, and a deep approach is active therefore leading to high quality learning. Being an active learner may still not engage the learner. Unfortunately many higher education strategies focus on active learning as being synonymous with effective, engaged, higher learning e.g. inter-active lectures and course notes, and activity based learning. Mann *op cit* suggests that focusing on alienated or engaged experiences of learning derives a more useful perspective. Students who are alienated from their studies lack any personal involvement with their learning and merely 'go through the motions' of study in a superficial way. They derive no personal meaning from the experience and

remain personally unchanged or undeveloped as a consequence of the 'learning'. An engaged learner in contrast is one who is personally connected to their learning in a way that allows them to locate personal meaning and relevance within it in a way that leads to personal growth and change. Here learning is not simply about navigating the assessment hoops by acquiring skills and knowledge; it is also about developing the whole person, which results in flexible, creative, responsible and developed individuals.

To a large extent the alienated and engaged view of students' learning experiences reflects the earlier work of Carl Rogers (1969). Rogers believed there to be only two main types of learning existing at opposite ends of a linear continuum. At one end is what he describes as the "...futile attempt to learn material that has no personal meaning. Such learning involves the mind only: It is learning that takes place 'from the neck up'. It does not involve feelings or personal meanings; it has no relevance for the whole person" (1994:35). At the other extreme of Rogers' learning continuum lies "...significant, meaningful and experiential learning...The whole person, both in feeling and in cognitive aspects, is part of the learning event" (1994: 35-36).

Rogers felt very strongly about the need to recognise that learning is not merely an intellectual activity: "I think we are well aware of the fact that one of the tragedies of modern education is that only cognitive learning is regarded as important" (1994:178).

Rogers' research and experience created a firm conviction in the belief that learning was linked to personal growth and development, holding that: "Significant learning combines the logical and the intuitive, the intellect and the feelings, the concept and the experience, the idea and the meaning" (1994:37). He suggested that learners who took responsibility for their learning (i.e. those that became actively engaged with it at a personal level) achieved deeper and more meaningful learning. Rogers termed this process of personal development 'self-actualisation'. The significance of the person as a unique human individual is a view shared by Barnett:

> "To reduce human action to a constellation of terms such as 'performance', 'competence, 'doing' and 'skill' is not just to resort to a hopelessly crude language with which to describe serious human endeavours. In the end, it is to

obliterate the humanness in human action. It is to deprive human beings of *human* being." (1994: 178 – Emphasis is author's own)

Fromm (1982) describes a similar dichotomy that mirrors Mann's alienated and engaged experiences of learning. He also argues that there are two fundamental ways of being – what he calls the 'having' and 'being' modes – "...having and being are two fundamental modes of experience, two different kinds of orientation towards self and the world...which determine the totality of a person's thinking, feeling and acting" (1982: 33). He views the 'having' mode as shallow and damaging to the self and the environment betraying "...a hidden unconscious alienation" (1982:31) and the 'being' mode as a deep and productive way of living. He points to ancient and cross-cultural sources to support the supremacy of the 'being' orientation. "The Buddha teaches that in order to arrive at the highest point of human development, we must not crave possessions...Marx taught that our goal should be to *be* much, not to *have* much" (1982:25 – Emphasis is author's own).

He suggests that these two modes of existence transcend and influence our progress and development in all areas of our lives including education and learning. Fromm particularly relates the two modes of existence to higher learning, and eloquently describes the difference between them in terms of their impact on the learning experience:

> "Students in the having mode of existence will listen to a lecture, hearing the words and understanding their logical structure and their meaning and, as best they can, will write down every word so that, later on, they can memorise their notes and thus pass an examination. But the content does not become part of their personal and individual system of thought, enriching and widening it. The students and the content of the lectures remain strangers to each other... They do not produce or create something new – in fact they feel rather disturbed by new thoughts and ideas about a subject because it questions the fixed store of information they have." (1982: 37-8)

This may be an all too familiar description of how many students relate to and experience their learning, and to some extent, how tutors relate to their teaching. The

student is passive and disengaged (or alienated) merely waiting at the allotted hour to receive another chunk of facts and information as the dormant recipients of knowledge transfer. It is a mechanical form of learning, comparable to Mann's *op cit* alienated learning experience, which impoverishes a student's capacity to both experience and learn. 'Having' learning is not an alive or productive process – it objectifies both learning and the learner and the relationship between the two is characterised by passivity or as Fromm (1982: 83) describes it a "deadness." The student is deprived – often by the tutor and the institutional context – of any autonomy, control, free will, creativity or desire in relation to their learning.

This experience is in sharp contrast to a student who exists and learns in the 'being' mode.

> "Instead of being passive receptacles of words and ideas, they listen, they *hear* and most importantly, they *receive* and they *respond* in an active, productive way. What they listen to stimulates their own thinking processes. Their listening is an alive process...Each student has been affected and changed." (Fromm 1982:38 – Emphasis is author's own)

Within this 'being' orientation the student is actively engaged in a learning process that incorporates participation and personal growth. The depth of the learning increases because meaning is derived from it and it is comparable to what Mann *op cit* described as the engaged approach to learning.

Fromm's analysis is particularly relevant within the current higher education system that places its focus on knowledge acquisition and skills development. Such a system "...generally tries to train people to *have* knowledge" (Fromm 1982:48) – treating learning as a product, to be acquired and possessed. This position denigrates the value of higher learning by ignoring the process or experience of higher learning – i.e. the active 'being' which promotes independence, freedom and critical reason. The university is in danger of churning out knowledge packages. This view is shared by Mann who states that: "Although in higher education we may be aiming for the development of critical being – for personal engagement, inclusion and lifelong

learning – the research findings suggest that we may not always be achieving this." (2001:7-8)

Clearly Fromm develops a strong argument for higher learners and their learning to take place in the 'being' mode in order to promote a deep and engaged approach to learning. Fromm, in line with all other humanistic psychologists believe that change in an individual's way of being is possible. He suggests that such change is facilitated by increasing self-awareness, self-understanding and the cultivation of the will to change. Others agree that change is possible and furthermore suggest that personal change itself is an integral part of the learning process:

> "Change is part of learning; facing new challenges and developing new strategies for overcoming them is a part of intellectual growth."
>
> Peelo (1994: 16)

Ramsden (1992) also noted in his later work that learning approaches were not intrinsic, fixed and impersonal characteristics within students and that change between approaches was a significant possibility. Moreover, he noted that learning approaches were affected by a wide variety of personal factors including a student's perceptions, conceptions, prior educational experiences, and also wider issues including the context of the learning.

Of these factors, perhaps the most significant, in terms of creating variation in a student's approach to learning, is their conception of learning. A conception of learning captures the way in which a student views or formulates their learning i.e. the personal meaning they find in their learning. Dahlgren and Marton (1978) identified two different and broad conceptions of learning. The first views learning as a passive activity where chunks of knowledge are transmitted to the learner. The second perceives learning to be an active process, which involves changing the learner's conception of reality in some way. Saljo (1979) elaborated on this earlier work and analysed the qualitative variation between students' descriptions of their learning. He subsequently derived 5 categories of learning conception (discussed in the section that follows) termed A to E inclusive.

These categories of conception have been confirmed by other researchers notably Van Rossum and Schenk (1984). In addition Marton, Dall'alba and Beaty (1993) offered a fuller description of the five conceptions and identified a sixth category of description – Category F.

In Table 2.1 below the 6 categories of learning conception (adapted from Hergenhahn *et al 2001*) are shown, followed by a short narrative description of each of the 6 categories of learning conception. Within the table I have also drawn together and identified the associated links between these learning conceptions and other related learning theories emerging from my preceding literature review. These linkages are also discussed in the following section.

Table 2.1: Conceptions of Learning and their Link to other Learning Theories

Conceptions of Learning		
Saljo (1979), Marton *et al* (1993)	Ramsden (1987) Mann (2001)	Dahlgren et al (1978) Rogers (1969) Fromm (1982)
Learning as ...		
A An increase in knowledge	**Surface approach**	**Passive product**
B Memorising	(Alienated)	(Having)
C Acquisition of facts etc., which can be used in practice	↓	↓
D Abstraction of meaning		
E Interpretative process aimed at understanding reality	(Engaged)	(Being)
F Changing as a person	**Deep approach**	**Active process**

Conception A – Learning as an increase in knowledge

Students adopt a passive approach to their learning, demonstrate scant personal involvement in the learning process and view learning as the receipt and storage of discrete pieces of information. Students prefer receiving clear factual information.

Conception B – Learning as memorising

Learning remains external to the individual with little personal involvement or interaction with their learning. There is some recognition that the received knowledge will need to be reproduced on specific occasions, most commonly in examinations.

Conception C – Learning as acquisition of facts which can be used in practice.

Student still views learning as passive and external but perceives a broader application spectrum for the received knowledge beyond assessment reproduction. Some acceptance that the acquired knowledge may need adaptation before being applied.

Conception D – Learning as the abstraction of meaning

Learning is active and involved with a focus on increasing understanding and providing personal meaning. Students participate and work independently to develop understanding and derive meaning using prior learning and connecting ideas across subject boundaries – i.e. are more holistic.

Conception E – Learning as an interpretative process aimed at understanding reality.

Embraces lifelong learning, and is personally and actively involved and engaged with their learning. Integrates some level of personal growth and change as a result of the understanding gained from their learning. Learning permeates an individual's life as a way of being.

Conception F – Learning as changing as a person

Views learning as an experiential process. Learning results in meaningful personal change and altered perceptions of the world around the individual. This is the most complex conceptualisation of learning identified and is in line with what Roger's *op cit* described as the 'self-actualised person'.

There is a clear progression in terms of increasing levels of personal involvement and depth of learning as one moves through the categories A to F. In this regard "...the different conceptions reflect a hierarchy, from the simplest conception, which view

learning as the acquisition of knowledge to that of learning involving changing as a person" Flood and Wilson (2002:2). What is also evident is that learning conceptions are not static or fixed characteristics, rather they "...show the development of the student from novice to expert in learning; a development that moreover is strongly contextually determined" van Rossum and Schenk (1985:636-637).

Flood and Wilson suggest that "...categorising learners relies on capturing their dominant strands of description" (2002:2). In addition it is possible to categorise students into groups of conceptions. Typically categories A-C are grouped together as reproductive oriented conceptions with a passive or alienated approach to learning. Conceptions D-F centre on the construction of meaning with an active or engaged approach to learning. These groupings are arguably and broadly analogous with the difference between Ramsden's *op cit* surface (conceptions A-C) and deep (conceptions D-F) approaches to learning, Fromm's *op cit* 'having' and 'being' distinction and Rogers' *op cit* progressive development of the self-actualised learner. Indeed van Rossum *et al* (1985) empirically found that students who held reproductive conceptions of learning adopted surface approaches to learning, whereas those who adopted constructive conceptions adopted deep approaches to learning. A further Australian study by Sharma (1997) concurs with these findings. He explored the learning conceptions of second-year undergraduate accounting students and found that those who held A-C conceptions of learning (i.e. those reporting highly syllabus-bound approaches, fear of failure, and preference for organised and factually based courses) tended to adopt surface approaches to learning.

As such there is a general consensus within the literature that the effectiveness of learning – in terms of its depth and meaning is enhanced by progressing students' conceptions of learning from a lower level (A – C) to a higher level (D – F). This is comparable with moving from a 'having' mode of learning to a 'being' mode, or becoming self-actualised. Potential movement requires some degree of personal change as a result of increasing levels of self-awareness and self-understanding. Thus movement or change is reliant on some level of self-development. It is this rationale that underlies the creation and implementation of the personal development programme within this research. My research builds on the recognised value of personal development in relation to learning and actively seeks to encourage its

occurrence in order to improve or enhance the personal learning experience. My approach understands that it is not possible to 'instruct' students to become personally developed and therefore better learners – students need to do this for themselves. What is possible, is to offer support and assistance in the process of self-development such that students are more able to develop and in so doing find a better way of learning for themselves. The paradigms developed by Rogers *op cit*, Fromm *op cit* and Saljo *op cit* (extended by Marton *et al*) may offer a practical, qualitative way of exploring and understanding the impact of any personal development programme on the learning experience, through detecting shifts in dominant learning conceptions and changes in the mode of learning.

Students' conceptions of learning clearly influence their learning approaches and the quality of their learning outcomes. It also joins a wider debate that calls for the inclusion of personal and emotional elements into the higher learning experience. Recent literature reflects and demonstrates this, with an increasing interest being placed on the relationship between emotion and learning. It is this area of the literature (the role of emotions in learning) that the next section of this chapter now considers.

Peelo is clear in that:

> "The process of learning is emotional. We are emotional beings and intellectual activity is not divorced from our emotional life." (1994:5)

This suggests adopting a more integrated or holistic view of the student that balances both the intellectual and emotional components of the self, catalyses a synergy that exerts a positive impact on learning. More (1974) argues that 'real' learning takes place when all three dimensions of learning, namely the cognitive, behavioural and affective are included, describing the latter affective dimension as the "...Cinderella of learning" (1974:137). This is particularly relevant in relation to assisting students to become effective learners, i.e. in learning-to-learn.

Others writers suggest that emotion is a source of energy that stimulates intellectual functioning. This view is consistent with the work of Leach and Moon (1999:17) who

describe emotion as "...a crucial catalyst in the learning process" and assert that pedagogic settings should aim to develop an individual's self-esteem in order to release learning potential. As such, emotional development of the learner is necessary to enable a student to take responsibility for and control of their learning and is central to the process of learning-to-learn. It is arguable that, to some extent, learning-to-learn is an inherent and natural phenomenon that individuals are born with. Each person begins life as an infant with a natural curiosity and innate interest that drives the individual to actively and emotionally engage with the discovery of the 'self' and the world around them. As individuals, development occurs as a consequence of this natural process which extends beyond the basic needs identified in Maslow's (1968) hierarchy towards higher levels of human development (including higher learning) and is the developmental process of 'self-actualisation' that Rogers described. Person-centred therapy takes this self-actualisation – the achievement of an individual's innate potential – as one of its basic tenets. However, patterns of nurture, schooling, societal and cultural influences and personal experiences can dampen or divert these internal developmental drives, which may be replaced with externally influenced behaviours such as obedience, rationality, dependency and often passivity. As a result, many students entering higher education may need assistance to rediscover or develop these internal self-actualising qualities and hence need support in the process of learning-to-learn.

Despite a lack of sector guidance on its development, learning-to-learn is recognised as an important aspect of higher learning. The DfEE (1998) lists 'improve own learning' as one of the six key higher learning skills, and Dearing (1997) adds the key skill of learning-to-learn to the familiar list of communication, numeracy, and information technology skills. Some commentators (Gibbs 2001) are cynical however of such attempts and suggest that its inclusion probably has more to do with improved economic and societal viability than a concern for quality education and its appearance on the *skills* agenda is seen as trivialising its true nature.

These criticisms are compounded by increasing expectations concerning the role of higher education which extend beyond learning and knowledge and into economic, and socio-political spheres in terms of improving living standards and assisting in a nation's drive to compete in globalised economies. This is reflected in the National

Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education Report (1997), which set out its statement of aims for higher education. These build on those of the Robbins Committee some 30 years previously and include:

- To stimulate and inspire learning throughout life.
- To increase knowledge and understanding.
- To serve the needs of the economy at local, regional and national levels.
- To play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised and inclusive society.

This plurality of aims illustrates the changing and multiple expectations of higher education. Additionally, political expectations that focus on social equity are also being made of higher education institutions.

> "The expansion of public funding has not taken place on the basis of cultivating young minds for their own sake... Universities have been given a mission ... it is to aid economic competitiveness and promote social inclusion."
>
> Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals (1999, Para. 14)

Universities are therefore, increasingly being seen as playing a key role in supporting the national economy and contributing to the country's international competitiveness. This economic link has "...placed the emphasis on vocationalism and the extrinsic value of education in terms of its employment outcomes, and the liberal idea of the pursuit of education for its own sake is increasingly undermined" (Winn 2002:447).

The contemporary focus is that universities are clearly viewed by government as a valid political tool of social and economic policy. However, a higher education remit that focuses on intellectual development; continues to emphasise skills acquisition and technical competence and that dances to the economic and social policy tune of its political masters, will remain remote from the spirit of learning-to-learn. Barnett (1998) already expresses concern that skills development alone is insufficient and will produce "...a society and a workforce that is adept at repeating yesterday's solutions to today's problems." Winn reiterates such concerns and suggests that vocationalising

higher education creates a learning atmosphere within which there is "...evidence of rapidly declining motivation, and difficulties in fulfilling good intentions about study habits [which] suggests that harnessing students early enthusiasm for academic work and assisting them to develop the skills necessary for independent learning might be a more fruitful approach" (2002: 455). Winn's findings suggest that there is a current need to explore ways of developing and supporting students' capacity for independent learning. Within my research, higher education is conceived as being concerned with much more than merely churning out skilled technicians that are demographically and socially inclusive and economically servile. It is about instilling a durable passion for learning, developing the intellectual **and** personal aspects of the self such that the individual becomes creative, responsive, more fully aware and able to explore and expand their true potential. Such engaged learning may result in graduates who are more fully developed and as such more able to meet the needs of contemporary society which is typified by a rapidly changing and deregulated labour market, driven by the needs of the current 'information society' or 'knowledge economy'. The latter is brought about by the increasing role of knowledge or intellectual capital within businesses. For example, the value of high-tech companies such as software and biotechnology companies, is not in its physical assets, but in intangibles such as knowledge and patents. Human or intellectual capital therefore becomes a crucial factor of production. Such a society requires employees who are able to undertake complex operations and creatively respond to the demands of technological changes as they occur. Consequently higher education is increasingly expected to be the provider of creative, flexible, developed and adept learners who are able to meet the needs of this information society.

Despite some persuasive arguments within the literature for including personal and emotional elements into higher education, there is by no means a consensus amongst interested parties that this should occur. Some commentators defend the emphasis of intellectual development and go as far as to identify a need to protect rationality from what they perceive to be the invasive and damaging impact of irrational emotions. Elster (1995:379) suggests that emotions "overwhelm or subvert rational mental processes". Forgas also notes that it is "...frequently assumed that affect (mood) has a disruptive, dangerous influence on thinking and behaviour" (2001:1).

This view of emotions and emotionality as detrimental to reason and thinking – the latter occupying a seemingly uncontested and superior position - creates a curious perspective. Carr (2001) notes that this mode of thinking, which places items in extreme opposition to each other, is a frequent feature of Western cultures. Carr cites the everyday oppositions of 'right or wrong', 'nature or nurture', 'public or private', 'head or heart' as examples of this common practice. It would be easy to add 'thinking or feeling' to this list of generally perceived antagonists. This phenomenon is described in the psychological literature as the notion of 'splitting', where the world is perceived in terms of extremes e.g. 'good or bad'. It is also a common device in rhetoric and a philosophical 'school' know as Manicheism.

One feature of this dichotomous thinking is that one term is typically elevated to a superior and more highly regarded position over the other. This is perhaps mirrored in the situation within higher education, where thinking (intellectual development) is highly regarded as the revered pinnacle of higher learning. In contrast feelings (emotional development) are relegated to an inferior, subordinate position and often viewed with some suspicion. This may offer some insight into the reasons underlying the lack of focus on emotions and personal development in higher education.

Psychologists view such splitting as a mechanism to simplify the perception of a complex environment by minimising contradiction and ambivalence. This supposedly increases the clarity of perception, but in reality such reductionism merely filters-out detail and as such restricts understanding of human experience, including learning. This is particularly relevant for higher learning, which by its very nature is complex and rich in the subtleties of meaning and interpretation existing between extreme positions, i.e. there is a movement away from the idea of 'right or wrong answers' in higher learning. As such there is a need to recognise that *especially* within higher education "the rational and emotional constitute a rich inter-relationship which ... are often fused or act in a co-existent and co-dependent fashion where one cannot be understood in the absence of the other" (Carr 2001:423).

This section of the literature review has explored the role of emotions in higher learning. The next section develops this discussion by considering the role of emotions in higher learning from a variety of alternative perspectives.

The case for emotions and emotional development in higher education

The condemnation of emotion in terms of its interference on rationality – threatening an individual's capacity for reasoned thought – can, to some extent, be both explained and challenged from a variety of different perspectives, including the following:

1. **Feminist perspective**

Authors such as Boler (1999) have explored the power of emotions from a feminist perspective and describe how science, reason and logic are viewed as the historic and traditional domain of men. Hence from this standpoint there is a tendency to conceptualise universities, which were developed to expound such cognitive areas, also as the domain of men. Boler suggests that the exclusion of emotion from areas (including higher education) is not a coincidence and moreover that the separation of the rational 'truth' from the 'subjective bias' of emotions is not a neutral divide:

> "Emotion had been positioned on the 'negative' side of the binary division. And emotion was not alone on the 'bad' side of the fence – women were there too.... The denigration of emotion and women is what enables reason and masculine intellectual mastery to appear as the winner in the contest for truth." (1999: xv)

This feminist position argues that there exists a deep suspicion of the female capacity for reasoned thought which positions women as emotional beings, whose rationality is compromised by their emotional nature. From such a standpoint emotion is understood as relegated to a second class position simply because of its association with the 'inferior' female gender and effectively erased from the realms of education. This view is shared by Aldrich who suggests that: "Dimensions of female domesticity and male vocationalism have continued to influence educational provision from the

medieval period until the twentieth century" (1982:12). These views suggest that women's historic positioning as emotional beings somehow impedes their rational capabilities. This segregation of the rational and emotional elements may therefore have some foundation in the perception of gender differences.

Moreover, Aldrich (1982) demonstrates how the clerical control of developing universities perpetuated the exclusion of women from higher education. "Christianity itself has no concept of God the mother, nor of God the daughter...[and as such]...women's' education was not focused on the intellectual or physical but on the social and moral" (1982: 30).

The exclusion of emotion from education is challenged by studies such as those of Woods (1993) and Boler (1999) who place emotion as central to the understanding of intelligence, and challenge the separation of reason and emotion that has defined much of our educational system. For Boler, emotions are viewed as being "... a significant feature of the educational transaction and process" (1999:17) having a key role to play in both cognition and pedagogy. As such, the feminist perspective views the exclusion of women (and thereby emotion) from the educational landscape as a form of social control serving to uphold male dominance under the guise of protecting rationality.

2. Biological Perspective

Other challenges to the separation of emotion and reason come from a biological perspective. As neuroscientists explore how the brain processes, stores and retrieves information, the more evident becomes the connection between emotion and reason since research is revealing that the same areas of the brain are involved in processing emotion and memory. Palomobo Weiss (2000) exposes the conflict between emotion and thought as erroneous and outlines the importance of emotional involvement in learning –

> "...recent research conducted by neurologists and educators show a strong link between emotion and reason, feelings and thoughts, thereby disproving the adage that emotion is the enemy of reason" (2000:44).

This research refutes the separation of thinking and feeling on biological grounds since they share a common neural system. As such it is not possible for emotions to intrude in the sphere of reason since they are both already inextricably linked and enmeshed at an anatomical level. Moreover, educator Eric Jensen (1995 in Carr 2000) holds that the brain's structure is such that the feelings at the time of learning are stored along with the content and context of the experience. Studies by Heath (1986) concur with this finding and demonstrate a close clinical relationship between memory and emotion at a neural level. Further research also importantly gives primacy to emotions, suggesting that it is emotions rather than logic that provide the impetus and conditions necessary for effective human learning to take place:

> "Emotion activates attention – which drives learning, memory and problem-solving behaviour" (Carr 2001:46).

This suggests that learning decisions based on emotions are not exceptional, since it is what happens most of the time, with emotional aspects providing the desire and the drive to learn. Perhaps unsurprisingly the etymology of the word 'emotion' stems from the Latin *emovere* – which translates into 'to move or to push'. It seems that the power of emotions have long been recognised for their capacity to drive forward human action. Fonberg (1986:92) agrees that emotions have "... an energizing property. Emotions are fuels for drives, for all motion, every performance and any behavioural act."

This view of emotions as the source of power that propels and sustains human action, including learning, is supported by Evans (2000: 11) who states that: "We operate well or badly in learning, and more specifically in problem-solving, according to the drive provided by our emotions. Reason is powered by emotion..."

It is somewhat easy to overlook this in the world of academia where logic, reason and intellectual development have been the unchallenged drivers and underlying rationale of higher education for so long.

3. Humanistic Perspective

The role of emotion in learning is also supported from a humanistic as well as a biological perspective. Candy, Crebert and O'Leary (1994) identify a wider spectrum of learning skills that includes personal abilities (such as working with others, planning and achieving goals) and personal attributes (such as tolerance and personal responsibility) as important for effective learning.

This is not a new connection since personal responsibility and personal skills have long been linked to effective education. In the 1950's Carl Rogers founded the person-centred approach to counselling, at the core of which are the concepts of self-awareness, personal responsibility and reflection. He held that human beings had an innate potential or fundamental drive to maintain, develop and enhance the 'self'. Rogers also held a strong belief that the person-centred philosophy was portable and extended his humanistic ideas and practices beyond the counselling arena and into other areas including management, but particularly into the sphere of education. He published his views on the need to reform education in a way that allowed it to become more person-centred (Rogers and Freiberg 1993). Rogers' ideas on learning were discussed earlier, specifically in relation to the relationship between learning and engaging the whole person as part of an active process (self-actualisation). From his experience and research he held that to maximise the innate learning potential of an individual it was necessary to develop a preference for feelings over thoughts. This, he felt would enhance learning by developing individuals in a way that enables the individual to participate responsibly in the learning process. He held that such responsible, self-initiated and experiential learning is more long lasting, pervasive and significant and describes 'real' learning as "...involving the whole person in significant, meaningful and experiential learning" (Rogers 1983:19). Thus Rogers *et al* (1993) felt that participative learning where the learner took personal responsibility for learning was more effective than passive, directed learning.

Others, including Peel & Warhead (2002) share this humanistic and developmental perspective that views learning as a personal journey of human development which offers an unlimited possibility for growth. Freer (1996: 48) suggests that "...learning is potentially liberating, by recognising the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human." Other, more contemporary writers, such as Mann

(2001) also continue to acknowledge the importance of recognising the humanity of students, rather than merely focusing on their intellect, and argue strongly for a more ethical educational practice. Interestingly students themselves have an expectation that personal growth and development is an intrinsic part of higher learning. Newstead and Hoskins demonstrate that the results of a study carried out with 600 students at the University of Plymouth show that 63% of students questioned agreed that part of the reason for studying at university was the "chance to develop as a person" (1999:76). This demonstrates a strong desire and expectation amongst students for personal change and growth within their higher learning.

Kluever and Green (1998) also place much emphasis on the role of personal responsibility in learning and created a Responsibility Scale to assess levels of responsibility amongst students. Other researchers in the field have continued to work on the role of personal responsibility in education from the standpoint of self-directed learning. Knowles (1975) too concludes that self-directed learning is consistent with an adult's natural process of psychological development and creates better learners. He also maintains that learners who enter educational programs that use more open and independent learning regimes (such as higher education) need to be self-directed in their approach. If these skills are missing the result is anxiety, frustration and often failure. From this work Knowles developed his theory of andragogy which views adult education as being characteristically self-directed.

Further writers continue to recognise the connection of self-directed learning and personal change. Brookfield (1988) stresses the importance of critical reflection and the creation of personal meaning in the context of effective learning. Baird (1991) holds that personal reflection is a key element of learning, and Biggs and Moore (1993) also conclude that the acceptance of self-responsibility is a prerequisite of effective learning.

The literature thus far demonstrates how the current cognitive emphasis within higher education ignores much of the learning research, which advocates the inclusion of the personal and emotional aspects of learning. A learning emphasis that centres on knowledge acquisition and built on the supports of logic and rationality and relies heavily on external reinforcement techniques (especially through the assessment

process e.g. the use of examinations which typifies much of higher education) may drive students to rely on drill, memorisation, rote and short-term surface learning at the expense of deep and engaged learning and understanding. It is therefore possible that the current agenda and cognitive emphasis of higher education itself stands in the way of higher learning. There appears to be a need to recognise that understanding involves "...many aspects of learners, such as their emotions, attitudes and perceptions as well as their intellects" (Hergenhahn *et al* 2001: 264). Moreover, this vein of research demonstrates that education needs to be more inclusive so that the emphasis on logic and reason is enhanced by the recognition of emotion as a valuable component of the learning process. Recognising the need for a personal and emotional dimension within higher education is the first stage of deriving a more meaningful, productive and satisfying higher education experience for students.

The next section of the literature review moves on to consider how best to integrate these personal and emotional aspects into higher education in order to secure the fuller development of human potential and deeper learning that is required and indeed expected of the higher education sector.

Reforming Higher Education to Include Personal Development

Despite calls from within sectors of the literature to encourage and support the inclusion of emotion and personal development in higher learning, emotions are virtually absent from the reform-centred writing surrounding UK higher education. Collier is critical of higher education's failure to fulfil what he sees as a responsibility to provide students with opportunities to explore and confront their internal motives and genuine values, suggesting that this can only be achieved "through deep, authentic understanding developed through 'existential' responses to issues." (1993:290)

Other critics include Blake, Smith and Standish (1998:64) who focus on the aims of higher education as elicited by Dearing (1997), suggesting that:

> "A society formed on Dearing's implicit views of learning could not make sense of itself and its world; the graduates of this kind of higher education could not, simply, understand what higher education was for. They could recall that a degree improves your job prospects, but that is another matter."

More recent criticism comes from Birgerstam who suggests that:

> "...in the university world the development of knowledge is generally – or at least too often – too rational in the wrong way. Consequently, students are being insufficiently prepared for the concrete and complex life outside the university...We need to learn to use our impressions, hunches and feelings." (2002:431)

Many writers share this support of the need for higher education to address the personal deficit within higher education programmes including Pennington who states that the role of higher education is to "...help shape the cognitive, emotional and moral development of individual adult learners" (1999:5). This suggests that skills and knowledge acquisition alone are no longer sufficient for the needs of modern learners.

Increasingly, writers are focusing on remedying the lack of emotions and feelings focus in higher education. These writers include Bruner (1996) who argues for the development of self-esteem within educational programs and views the personal side of education as a central issue for educational reform. Chickering and Reisser support this view and maintain that higher learning is characterised by "...psychosocial development...a journey of increasing complexity toward individuation – the discovery and refinement of one's unique way of being" (1993: 35).

Chickering *et al* suggest that such psychosocial development progresses along major vectors (or directions) that include developing interpersonal competencies, managing emotions, establishing identity and developing autonomy. Such a model places emphasis on educators addressing more than merely improving students' intellectual or thinking skills. This concurs the earlier views of Rogers (1983) that the process of

seeking knowledge, not acquiring the knowledge itself, is the basis of effective education.

Despite the recognition of the need to include emotional and personal development in the higher learning arena it appears largely to have been kept off the higher education agenda – some personal skills are mentioned -- e.g. communication skills, but these too are discussed in a manner that is largely devoid of emotionality.

This has not gone unnoticed within the academic community and writers including Hargreaves are critical of higher education's failure to respond to the need for emotions to be included within higher learning:

> "...many of those who initiate and manage educational reform, or who write about educational change in general, ignore or underplay one of the most fundamental aspects of teaching and learning: the emotional dimension." (1998:835)

Hargreaves is primarily concerned with the emotional aspect of teaching, but recognises that both teaching and learning involve emotional understanding, because it involves relationships between individuals. If individuals are not skilled in developing relationships with others then inaccuracies of emotional understanding may occur, a phenomenon that Denzin (1984) refers to as 'spurious emotionality'. Hargreaves continues by suggesting that such gaps in emotional understanding compromise standards of education and concludes that emotional misunderstanding between students and tutors arises because the structure and reform of education leaves no time or encouragement for its establishment: "Creating conditions where better emotional understanding can occur between teachers and their students should therefore be a significant educational priority" (1998:839-40). The extent of Hargreaves' belief in the importance of emotions in learning is revealed by his statement that:

> "...the discourse of educational reform must acknowledge and even honor the centrality of emotions to the process and outcomes of teaching, learning and

caring in our schools. Emotions must no longer be ignored, still less demeaned as peripheral in the proclamations of policymakers..." (1998: 850)

Whilst Hargreaves focuses on high school education, many of the issues he raises are also pertinent to the higher education system. Rising student numbers, increased anonymity, one-way assessment systems, the dominance of cognitive subject matter, reduced contact times, growth of computer-aided-learning (CAL), all depersonalise the higher learning experience and make self-development and the establishment of meaningful emotional bonds between students and tutors difficult which in turn undermines the depth of the learning experience.

My research therefore concurs with Hargreaves' view of emotions as educationally central and as such prioritises emotional and personal development as an intrinsic part of the process of higher learning.

The apparent resistance to change may be lessened as the need to recognise the role of emotional and personal development in higher education is being substantially strengthened as the concept of intelligence itself is increasingly associated with emotionality. Although the impact of emotion on work is not a new phenomenon, (Elton Mayo was studying outlook and emotional attitude on worker happiness in 1933), it was not until the early 1970's that psychologists began to explore the relationship between thought and feelings and their combined influence on intelligence. As described earlier, prior to 1970 notions of intelligence predominantly concentrated on thinking. During the 1970's and 1980's aspects of cognition and affect (mood) became linked as research examined the interaction of thoughts and feelings. The field of non-verbal communication developed scales to include emotional aspects and Gardner's theory of multiple intelligence, which included the capacity to perceive and symbolise emotions, emerged. In the late 1980's Mayer and Salovey published a series of research articles on emotional intelligence, which provided a first review of potential areas relevant to an emotional intelligence. Measures of emotional intelligence and arguments to recognise it as an actual intelligence were quick to follow.

Emotional intelligence is defined by Bar-On (1997) in Ciarrochi, Forgas and Mayer (2001:14) as "an array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures." Emotional intelligence is concerned with the ability to perceive the emotions of self and others, assimilate emotion-related feelings, understand the information of those emotions and manage them. A study by Cobb and Mayer (2001) demonstrates that individuals with higher levels of emotional intelligence experience lower levels of problem behaviours (e.g. violence). This relationship persists even after statistically controlling for the effects of gender, intelligence and self-reported empathy. On an individual level, Cobb *et al* suggest that an emotionally intelligent person possesses the ability to process information in a more sophisticated way - i.e. at a higher level.

Ciarrochi *et al* (2001) also explore the link between affect and emotional intelligence in a variety of settings including education. They define affect as "...low intensity moods, that are diffuse and create enduring states. Their effect on thinking and behaviour tends to be insidious, enduring and subtle" (2001:47). This recent evidence suggests that affect has a pervasive influence on both social thinking and behaviour.

The impact of affect on learning outcomes has also been explored. A study by Gracia and Jenkins (2002) suggests that undergraduate academic performance is influenced, in part, by the affective state of an individual. Emotional intelligence may provide an individual with the mechanisms to recognise and understand when and why such affective effects occur and how best to manage their impact on thinking and behaviour.

Daniel Goleman (1995) in his book, "Emotional Intelligence – why it can matter more than IQ" popularised the idea of emotional intelligence and increased the profile of emotion in terms of determining an individual's intelligence. To some extent this work lent credibility to the emotional aspect of intelligence. Goleman's view of emotional intelligence is loosely based on the prior academic research and he places a high value on self-awareness, self-responsibility and empathy which are all central to and consistent with the Rogerian perspective of personal development derived some 35 years earlier. In common with Rogers, Goleman maintains that these skills

together with other aspects of emotional intelligence can be developed. However, unlike Rogers, Goleman suggests they can be quantified and concludes that the development of emotional skills may enable us to "maximise the intellectual potential the genetic lottery has given us" (1995:ix). This work is not without its critics, indeed Goleman himself recognises the risks of ascribing a "numerical yardstick to an individual's character as well as his intellect" (1995:x). His view of emotional intelligence has also been criticised for being too simplistic and failing to consider the significant impact of differences of culture, social class and gender. What is also curious within Goleman's work is that the explicit 'valuing' of emotion fails to place women with their traditional, albeit stereotypical, affinity for emotional sensitivity at an advantage in the league of emotional intelligence. Some writers, including Boler *op cit* see Goleman's work as an attempt by masculinity to recapture emerging emotionality and accuses the text of being a "...blueprint for male CEO success" (1999:vii).

From the late 1990's to date the concept of Emotional Intelligence has become refined along with new measures of it that go beyond the early attempts of Lane, Quinlan, Schwartz, Walker and Zeitlin (1990) who developed a cognitive-developmental measure of emotion. Ciarrochi *et al* (2001) hold that the concept of emotional intelligence has served to reinforce the important relationship between reason and emotion. They view its main contribution as the recognition that emotion and thought are flexibly linked. Despite it being the recent work of Goleman that popularised the profile of emotional intelligence in society in the late 1990's, the link between thinking and feeling dates back more than 2000 years to Ancient Greece. It seems that we have moved full circle back to the realisation that emotional development is a key component of personal development, which impacts on every aspect of an individual's life – including their capacity, and drive to learn. To ignore it is to compromise learning potential.

The literature therefore presents a raft of compelling evidence to support the idea that the inclusion of emotional and personal development into higher education would provide some significant benefits, which to summarise includes:

- improving learning outcomes (Hargreaves 1998)

- enhancing the process of learning by energising it (Fonberg 1986) and making it deeper, fuller and more meaningful (Peelo 1994)
- assisting students in the 'self-actualising' process of learning-to-learn, thereby creating more pervasive and significant learning (Rogers 1994)
- re-directing the current focus on skills development alone which restricts the flexibility and creativity of graduates (Barnett 1998)
- strengthening learning by capitalising on the significant synergy that exists between thinking and feeling (Carr 2001)
- release/maximise learning/intellectual potential (Boler 1999/Goleman 1995)
- cultivate an 'alive' learning process where students learn in the 'being' mode (Fromm 1982)
- engage learners in a way that allows them to control their learning (Mann 2001)
- develop a deeper conception of learning (Marton *et al* 1993)
- enhance academic performance (Gracia and Jenkins 2002)

As such, emotional development clearly has an important role to play in higher education in ensuring that learners reach a level of personal development that permits them to actively engage with and be responsible for their learning and thereby maximise their learning potential. Humes (2000:45) emphasises the increasing awareness of the need to include personal and emotional dimensions into learning evidenced by "...an emerging professional debate involving administrators, policy makers and school leaders, not just academic researchers, about the importance of emotion in educational settings."

Despite the increasing call for the inclusion of an emotional dimension within educational settings, little has been written in the literature about how to practically integrate emotions and personal development into higher education. As such it remains unclear how best to facilitate and integrate emotional development into the learning arena. This gap in current understanding is itself identified within the literature and expressed by Antonacopoulou and Gabriel:

> "Although emotion is recognised as one of the factors affecting learning positively or negatively, our understanding of how emotion contributes to the learning process is limited." (2001:443)

Others, including Abouserie whilst acknowledging the important role of emotional development programmes within higher education stress that "...research is needed to establish their optimum format and content." (1995:24)

It is important to recognise that calls to include the emotional and personal aspects into the learning arena (including this research) are not anti-intellectual measures. What is being advocated is that higher education adopts a holistic view of the learner and learning and uses the powerful synergy that exists between thinking and feeling to strengthen learning and indeed, enhance intellectual development. The literature reveals that the possible mechanisms and methods that could be used to achieve this are, at best somewhat vague and in reality largely unexplored and consequently unknown. A limited amount of further research offers a brief insight into how some aspects of emotional or personal development could be integrated into higher learning.

In terms of improving learning in higher education stimulating the desire to learn may be one way of engaging emotions. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983), Entwistle and Tait (1990) and Entwistle and Marton (1994) suggest that developing study skills, exploring personal study strategies and raising personal awareness are all key. Other researchers also indicate that personal reflection, used as a form of internal feedback, accelerate learning (Schmidt *et al* 1990). Later studies by Entwistle (1996) demonstrate that low self-esteem, fear of failure and anxiety increases the tendency to adopt superficial, or surface approaches to learning. Studies by Adler, Milne and Stringer (2000) demonstrate that a lack of student readiness and inadequate educator support mechanisms are significant impediments to learner responsibility. Many students demonstrated high levels of passivity in that "... students believe their role in class is to be lectured to and not asked questions" and view teachers who adopt the role of facilitator as "shirking their teaching responsibilities" (2002: 120). Abouserie (1995) found that student's self esteem has a significant effect on the way they deal with information and with learning situations, such that students with high self-esteem

adopt deeper approaches to studying, allowing greater comprehension and elaboration. As such Abouserie advocates that students be exposed to "self-esteem enhancement programmes" (1995:24) to help them to change their self-perception and their perception of the learning environment in a way that leads to an improvement in learning outcomes. McCarthy & Schmeck (1988) concur with this and state that students' perceptions can be influenced such that their overall cognitive and emotional development is enhanced.

Ratnesar and Mitchell (1997) actively sought to facilitate the personal development of their students by inserting emotion learning exercises into the curriculum of an ordinary school day in New Haven, Connecticut, USA. Here, it was felt that the children's ability to recognise their own emotions, empathise with their peers and deal with crises had a direct influence on their life chances as much as the more traditional skills of intelligence. As such these emotion learning exercises were found to create positive attitudes amongst the participants towards others and also improved their critical thinking skills.

The last section of the literature review critically examines the use of the person-centred philosophy and methods as an approach for practically integrating emotions into higher learning. However, prior to considering this aspect it may be helpful to summarise the findings of the literature review thus far.

I began by examining the literature that relates to the current nature of higher education and discussed how the historical development and current skills agenda has resulted in a knowledge and skills acquisition focus within higher education that focuses on cognitive abilities. However the literature that focuses on the process of learning itself demonstrates how our understanding of learning has moved beyond being restricted to thinking or cognitive abilities. The literature highlights the important role that emotions have to play in learning. Furthermore, the education literature demonstrates that individuals' approaches and conceptions of learning are important facets of the ability to learn and that these aspects can be linked to levels of personal development. As such the last part of the literature review now considers the use of person-centred approaches as a means of introducing emotions and personal development into higher education in order to support and enhance students' learning.

Using Person-Centred Principles to Support Emotional and Personal Development

My research seeks to provide a bridge between the theoretical call for the practical inclusion of emotions as a complement to cognition and the lack of understanding that currently exists in terms of methods of integrating emotions into higher education. The limited amount of research in this area, explored above, suggests that personal development strategies may be an effective method of incorporating emotionality into learning. One established and accepted method of affecting such development in the counselling arena is via person-centred psychotherapy principles. My research explores the creation and delivery of a supported personal and emotional development programme using person-centred principles as one possible mechanism of facilitating emotional development within higher education and thereby bridging the gap between theory and practice. As such the final section of this chapter discusses the principles and suitability of the person-centred approach to personal and emotional development within higher education. The details of the philosophy, techniques and development of the model, together with its implementation and outcomes are fully discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

Person-centred therapy is a firmly established and well-used counselling approach. A 1993 British Association of Counsellors (BAC) study indicates that 57% of UK counselling practitioners consider themselves to be person-centred therapists. It therefore constitutes the most popular approach to psychotherapy within the UK.

Person-centred therapy was founded in the United States of America in the 1950's. It developed out of the humanistic branch of psychology, which had begun to argue that it was "...essential for psychology to begin to take more account of the dimensions of human experience..." (McLeod & Wheeler 1995:285). This humanistic branch of psychology developed as a major opponent to the two other dominant schools of psychology at the time, namely behaviourism and psychoanalytic theory. Humanism largely rejects the rather mechanistic or scientific view of human beings offered by its two predecessors as too reductionist and restrictive and therefore failing to provide a

deeper understanding of the whole person. Humanistic psychology quickly developed to become the third force in psychology and views personality as emerging from an individual's perceptions of their own experiences. This perspective identifies the individual as a rational, free, unique and self-determining being possessing free will. Significant emphasis is placed on this notion of freedom – the ability to be in control of one's being and make personal choices and decisions. The humanistic perspective therefore asserts a basic underlying human motive to maintain and develop personal positive potential – which as discussed earlier is the process referred to as 'self-actualisation'.

One of the leading members of this humanistic movement, with its encouragement of greater experiential recognition, was Dr. Carl Rogers, who became the key figure in the development of, what is now known as, the person-centred approach to counselling. Rogers' theory developed from an innate conviction that a person should rely upon his own judgement of the self, i.e. have "trust in one's own internal locus of evaluation" (Thorne 1992:8). Rogers was fundamentally optimistic in his view of human beings and held "a passionate belief in the potential of all individuals to flourish in conditions which are supportive, respectful and genuinely trusting of them" (Hawtin 2000:173) – i.e. the ability to self-actualise.

The major constraint on this actualising tendency comes from one's environment – the situation one exists within. Constraints of both a physical and psychological nature impede self-actualisation and stunt or even stop the growth (both physical and psychological) of the human being. For example, if a developing child is not provided with sufficient positive encouragement and praise for its endeavours this may damage their self-esteem and self-worth and lead them to the conclusion that they are not 'good enough'. This may result in a loss of confidence in their abilities and lead to future under-achievement. The environment has therefore impacted – in this instance in a negative way – upon the individual, interrupting the self-actualising process.

The ability and freedom to actualise is central to human development but is "keenly sensitive to the subtle complexity of human differences" (Thorne, 2001:27). As such efforts to enhance actualisation need to accommodate human difference and cannot be

prescriptive and narrow in their outlook. Person-centred therapy is ideally suited to this situation where an individualistic solution is required – i.e. an approach that allows for these complexities of human difference. Self-regard in terms of our capacity to feel good about ourselves is particularly sensitive to environmental constraints – namely the quality and consistency of the positive regard shown to us by others. Rogers termed our reliance on the views of others in terms of our ability to develop healthy levels of self-regard, as 'conditions of worth'.

High levels of personal growth reduce our reliance on the opinions of others and thereby reduce these conditions of worth allowing one to:

> "...overcome the need to win approval or avoid disapproval from others and more closely align the real self with the self-perception." (Wilkins, 1997: 37)

To this end person-centred therapy is not concerned with solving problems on behalf of another, or imposing – however subtly – external strategies, interpretations or explanations of the other. It is dedicated towards helping individuals to develop themselves (by raising their subjective awareness) such that they are in a position to create their own personal solutions, strategies, interpretations and explanations that 'fit' with that individual. The approach places the emphasis on feelings and emotion rather than the cognitive or behavioural aspects.

However, despite its feelings focus person-centred therapy is concerned with the whole person (including thoughts and actions). It therefore considers the influence of feelings on both thoughts and actions in an effort to understand and develop the whole person and as such is process orientated. Gendlin (1984) demonstrates how thoughts and feelings are engaged together within person-centred therapy to form the "raw experience of life" (BAC 1999:7). Focusing the individual on the interaction of their thoughts and feelings - what Gendlin describes as 'the edge of awareness'- enables the person to become more aware of their true self and strengthens the client's openness to new possibilities.

The person-centred philosophy also focuses on the present rather than the past and places emphasis upon - and therefore validates - the subjective 'lived' experience of

the person. The person-centred philosophy legitimises the subjective experience of the individual by concentrating on and supporting the individual to develop the self from within their own subjective view of reality. This process of being heard and accepted from within ones own perspective is a powerful validation. Such positive validation raises levels of self-acceptance in a way that allows the individual to adopt a more holistic or integrated response to life generally, encompassing all areas of an individual's life. Rogers held that such self-acceptance was critical to personal development:

> "...we cannot change, we cannot move away from what we are, until we thoroughly *accept* what we are." (1951:17 - Emphasis author's own).

Person-centred therapy is thus empowering in its aspect and moves away from the notion of the therapist or teacher as the expert in control (which is in sharp contrast to the psychoanalytic approach) and places the individual as the directional driving force in the therapeutic relationship. The person-centred approach demonstrates a commitment to the individual, viewing them as the primary reference point in the process and rejects the need to refer to external figures of authority and control. Bozarth and Brodley outline the importance of "rejecting the pursuit of control and authority over other persons" (1986: 7) as an important feature of the belief system underlying the person-centred approach.

The person-centred approach has been developed with a good degree of academic rigour. Rogers and his colleagues engaged in a significant volume of research into the process and outcomes of the person-centred approach – see Rogers (1951, 1961), Mearns and Thorne (1988), McLeod (1993) and Mearns (1994). Such attention has resulted in the person-centred approach being supported by what the BAC refer to as "a substantial amount of research evidence" (1999:6).

At its core, person-centred counselling uses the "...relationship between the client and the counsellor to facilitate the development of the client" (McLeod & Wheeler 1995:286). The therapeutic 'power' of the approach is embedded in this relationship – which is consequently perhaps the most important element within the approach. This relationship is characterised by a number of features – termed 'core conditions'

(Rogers 1959) which must be present if the relationship is to have a beneficial impact. These 'core conditions' are provided by the counsellor and comprise:

- ❖ Empathy
- ❖ Unconditional positive regard (UPR)
- ❖ Congruence

(i) Empathy or empathic understanding is defined by Rogers as:

> "...the ability to perceive the internal frame of reference of another with accuracy and within the emotional components and meanings which pertain thereto, as if one were the other person but without ever losing the 'as if' condition..." (1959:210)

It is therefore concerned with offering a deep understanding of the subjective reality of another but in a way that requires a degree of separateness to be maintained. Rogers claimed that the maintenance of the 'as if' condition is essential to protect the quality of the empathic understanding. Failure to protect the separateness results in a state of identification. Identification is different from empathy and is characterised by a close association with the situation. However, identification compromises the therapeutic potential of the relationship because it shifts the focus of the interaction more evenly across the parties. Whilst the relationship is evenly balanced in terms of its power and status, the subject of interest should remain almost exclusively on the client. Identification can diffuse this focus to include the therapist and thereby dilute the therapeutic influence of the encounter.

The positive impact of empathy in terms of creating effective counselling is well documented (see Barrett-Lennard, 1962; Lorr, 1965; Rogers, 1979; Patterson, 1984). An empathic climate dissolves alienation, and provides a safe environment within which the client can explore their feelings at a deeper level.

(ii) Unconditional Positive Regard (UPR) is concerned with providing the client with a non-judgemental, total acceptance that offers a positive and respectful regard, which is not contingent or reliant on any other issue. It is defined by Thorne as:

> "...a caring by the therapist which is totally uncontaminated by the judgements or evaluations of the thoughts, feelings or behaviour of the client". (2001: 37)

It involves the suspension of the therapists own system of values and beliefs and this fosters a climate where judgements are not necessary within the relationship. This is difficult in itself because it requires the therapist to accept the client as they are and not how they would like or prefer them to be. However, once attained it creates an attitude that engenders trust and thus leads to deeper self-exploration:

> "The client is more able to feel safe to explore negative feelings...and to face himself honestly without the ever-present fear of rejection or condemnation" Mearns & Thorne (2001: 15)

As such UPR is vital in order for the client to experience the feeling of being accepted and regarded for who and what they are without the fear of that acceptance being deflected or withdrawn as a consequence of any particular client behaviour or attitude. Thus the client has no need to pretend to be someone else in order to gain acceptance, nor to conceal parts of themselves that they feel are unacceptable. Nothing can be gained or lost from being one's true self. This provides the client with the freedom to express, explore and develop oneself without the fear of reprisal, rejection or condemnation, which of itself is an intensely liberating experience.

(iii) Congruence is the third and final 'core condition' and is considered to be a state of being and is defined by Spinelli as:

> "...the therapist's ability to be present and without façade, as a living model for authentic being...to be as real, as transparent, as free of defences as possible to provide clients with the necessary strength and willingness to engage in honest and accurate self-exploration and revelation." (1989:151-52)

Many human interactions take place with some element of deception where emotions and intentions are concealed - whether it is the feelings one is experiencing, or the

true intentions one is harbouring, or the professional front one is presenting, or the level of interest one is displaying. This creates a veil of everyday pretence behind which one's real, open and honest self is hidden and also serves to deliberately mislead and manipulate others. Congruence attempts to cut through this disingenuous behaviour. It requires the therapist to be their true self, to be transparent and present for the client so that the client receives honest interactions and genuine responses through which it is easier for the client to begin to see and understand their true self. Given the level of pretence endemic in even the most mundane daily conversations, congruence is not an easy condition for the therapist to achieve. Tudor and Worrall (1994) identify 4 essential abilities necessary to achieve congruence as; self-awareness, the ability to demonstrate an active self-awareness, well developed communication skills, and the ability to be appropriate – i.e. sensitive and responsive to situations as they develop.

Clearly the ability to demonstrate the 'core conditions' requires a good degree of training on the part of the therapist and a strong commitment to their own self-development. Collectively, the 'core' conditions enable the development of a supportive relationship that offers a safe environment for a client. Within this climate of safety it becomes possible for the client to begin to disclose aspects of the self that are painful, shameful or hidden. The counsellor facilitates and enhances the level of client self-disclosure via the use of active reflective techniques. These act like a mirror reflecting aspects of the self, back to the client that perhaps were not previously seen before or understood or had been ignored. Through this process the client begins to more clearly perceive and understand the self - becoming more fully self-aware in the process. With increasing levels of self-awareness come increased levels of self-understanding and this promotes self-acceptance. This increased level of self-acceptance acts as a platform upon which the individual can begin to develop or change aspects of the self.

The person-centred approach combines the arts of relating, listening and understanding and its characteristic features are summarised in the following table.

Table 2.2 Summary of the Features Inherent in the Person-Centred Philosophy - adapted from McLeod and Wheeler (1995)

FEATURE
A conscious process – based in the present and concerned with an individual's subjective reality
Views individuals as inherently good and self-actualising
Uses equally structured relationships with no power imbalance
Is client-led, working to the client's agenda
Focuses on experiencing and expressing feelings
Accepts client as they are – is non-judgemental
Uses relationships as its core therapeutic feature
Encourages self-interpretation, promoting self-understanding and self-acceptance
Promotes personal growth, independence and autonomy

Although the person-centred approach was developed as a psychotherapeutic tool its transferability to other areas – especially education – is recognised within the literature. The portability of the philosophy is encapsulated by Vincent:

> "The person-centred approach is a broad umbrella and can be applied in so many different fields – we can look at communities, politics, education, not just one-to-one therapy." (1999:15)

Rogers also displayed a strong belief that client centred principles were applicable to almost every facet of day-to-day living (seeing it as a complete way of being), but cited education as an arena particularly suited to using person-centred principles:

> "If the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respect is the most effective basis for facilitating the learning which is called therapy, then might it not be the basis for the learning which is called education?"
>
> Rogers (1986:12, in Bligh)

This belief is evident in his 1969 book 'Freedom to Learn: a View of What Education Might Become' within which Rogers developed a student-centred approach to teaching that was built on the concepts of client-centred therapy. It holds the following tenets at its core:

- Learners must take active responsibility for their learning since it is not possible to teach another person directly, only to facilitate their learning.
- Learning is a personal phenomenon since a person learns significantly only those things that he perceives as being related to the self.
- Learning involves self-awareness and understanding since significant learning occurs where the threat to the self of the learning is minimised.

To effect this type of learning it is necessary to create a climate of acceptance that puts the purposes of the student at the forefront of learning.

Rogers' views on the portability of the approach have achieved broad acceptance and the philosophy and principles of the person-centred approach are now:

> "...widely accepted as the basis for forming positive and enabling relationships and it has been profoundly influential in education and the provision of statutory and voluntary health and social services" Hawtin (2000: 173).

Cotton also supports the applicability of the person-centred approach to learning and states that: "One of the most obvious results of the acceptance of humanistic psychological principles is the current trend towards student-centred learning. Teachers must facilitate the development of the individual's self concept" (1995:111). Therefore, there is a clear need to encourage students' personal participation and contribution and to value their views and contributions.

Other research has also linked the use of personal development to the area of education. Rawson views the remit of higher education to be "...about the start of a

lifelong process of personal development" (2000:236). Rawson (2001) progresses this belief by developing a model of learning-to-learn that enables the learner to engage in a process of self-reflection about their learning which supports the students in becoming more self-aware. Such a model extends beyond the skills development agenda (e.g. communication skills) and "...requires a far deeper and much more personal learning process" (2001:4). Its rationale is consistent with Rogers' ideas concerning the development of self. Rawson argues that this type of learning is particularly relevant in higher education and cites the views of Barnett (1998) in support of this - "In a world of change and unpredictability continued personal viability cannot be based upon knowledge and skills alone."

Tinto (1993) progressed the use and value of personal development in higher education by linking it to the issue of retention. This work establishes some principles for institutional action and argues for "...the running of programmes in which the emphasis is on maximizing student development", and more significantly argues for the "... acknowledgement through practice that support for students' academic development needs to be augmented by support for their personal development" (1993: 39).

Cotton too discusses ways to improve a student's learning effectiveness and suggests that "...the only way to do this is to be able to understand oneself and work to a planned scheme of self-development." (1995:109)

Ratigan (1989) concurs with the pivotal role played by student counselling support in higher education and suggests that the role offers a tripartite function. Its first element is remedial; its second is preventative with its third being developmental. The personal development programme used within this research moves beyond the remedial or deficit model implied by a mere study skills approach and incorporates all three of Ratigan's functions, placing particular emphasis on the developmental stage. Such coverage creates a more robust programme of counselling support in higher learning.

In addition, my programme develops according to local conditions and needs as advocated by Wolfendale and Corbett (1996) and is therefore designed to 'fit'. It uses

a proactive approach (but uses reactive strategies within it) and is delivered as an integral part of the learning experience – embedded in the curriculum - of the first year of undergraduate study. It offers an active and meaningful as opposed to mechanistic, development method. The work is complex, operating on many levels to mirror reality and is consistent with the view of Peelo that development programmes should "...reflecting students' myriad relationships – academic and non-academic - with their pasts and futures, as well as within the current academic environment." (2002: 163)

This section of the literature review reveals a level of support for the portability of the principles of person-centred counselling extending beyond their therapeutic roots and into other spheres, notably education. This is perhaps best encapsulated by Rogers himself: "To my mind the best of education would produce a person very similar to the one produced by the best of therapy" (1994: 313).

Higher education as a field is concerned with supporting students to become independent learners, self-driven and autonomous in their approach. In common with this the person-centred philosophy is similarly concerned with encouraging the individual to take responsibility and control for their own development. As such there is a good degree of consensus and consistency between the ethos of higher education and the philosophy of the person-centred approach – both placing significant emphasis on personal growth and independence. The person-centred philosophy is thus considered to be an appropriate mechanism for enhancing learning within higher education, which itself leans heavily towards independent study and student-centred learning. Within this framework the role of the lecturer is increasingly that of a facilitator of the learning process - what Keller refers to as the "educational engineer" (1968: 89) - and more emphasis is placed on the students developing self-responsibility and autonomy in their learning approach.

My research therefore contends that, in terms of higher education, the person-centred philosophy provides an ideal medium for tapping into the inner resources of a student to assist the learning-to learn process in order to unleash their innate learning potential and enable the actualising tendency to be fully expressed within their learning.

Conclusion

This chapter has exposed and discussed the traditional emphasis on cognition and intellectual development - in terms of knowledge and skills acquisition - that exists in higher education. It contends that emotions have been relegated within higher learning, effectively taking a back seat to the 'really' important business of cognitive learning. It has examined this position against the current research in higher learning and exposed a gap between higher learning theory and practice. The literature demonstrates a strong link between emotion and reason, feelings and thought and a clear rationale for targeting emotional/personal development in conjunction with intellectual development to maximise learning potential, and assist in the process of learning to learn.

However the literature also reveals that there is a deficit of programmes or methods in existence for supporting and developing the practical integration of the personal and emotional aspects into higher learning. To this end the use of person-centred principles is discussed as a suitable framework within which to create and undertake a programme of personal and emotional development work with students to support their learning.

It is important to realise that any programme of personal development would need to 'fit' within the wider context of student experience. This enables recognition that students and higher learning do not exist in a void and undertake their learning within a wider institutional framework. The next chapter of the thesis explores the nature of the wider contextual issues of higher education and their particular impact on students and their learning such that the need for emotional and personal development is intensified.

Chapter 3

The Context of Higher Learning

In chapter 2, through reviewing the existing literature, I identified two current needs within higher education as follows:

1. The need for an improved system of student support.
2. The need to include emotions within higher learning as a complement that enhances its cognitive focus.

My research brings together these two issues and seeks to address them in a combined way by using emotions and personal development as a means of creating an improved student support system. The reviewed literature supports the use of personal development initiatives as a potential vehicle for integrating emotions into higher education, together with the suitability of person-centred psychotherapy principles as a framework for developing such initiatives.

However, in addition to the arguments presented in that chapter - that emotional development improves learning in a generic sense (and amongst all learners) - there are also specific issues or reasons why it is particularly important at present, as higher education undergoes a period of rapid change. Students and their learning do not exist in a vacuum - they occur within a wider socio-political context. There are social, political and institutional forces shaping and reshaping the emotional landscape of both teaching and learning in higher education. These create a dynamic context within which students have to develop in order to effectively undertake, manage and control their learning. If my research is to offer meaningful support to students that is relevant to their particular learning needs, it is important to understand, as fully as possible, the nature of students' learning experiences. This does not begin and end with a consideration of the individual in isolation, but has to include an awareness of the key issues within the higher education sector that have a contextual impact on that experience.

This chapter therefore seeks to understand the contextual backdrop to higher learning and consider its impact on the student experience. It begins by considering the relevant literature, which reveals that higher education is experiencing a period of rapid change and as such is a dynamic environment. The chapter progresses to explore key changes in the sector and consider how these changes affect student experience especially in relation to the issues of student transition and retention. Finally the chapter discusses how the current higher education environment may accentuate the need for both improved student support as well as the integration of personal and emotional development initiatives.

The Impact of the Higher Education Context

In order to appreciate the nature of the pressures that students face it is necessary to understand the key changes that are taking place in higher education and their potential impact on the student experience. It is only through such understanding that relevant and meaningful support and facilitation of learning can be provided. Brookfield suggests that the facilitation of learning is "...a highly complex psychosocial drama in which the personalities of the individuals involved, the contextual setting for the educational transaction and the prevailing political climate crucially affect the nature and form of learning" (1986: vii). As such the inclusion of contextual information provides another dimension, which allows a fuller appreciation of the student experience *in situ*. Peelo and Wareham comment that:

"...academic life and learning has to be understood holistically, with an awareness of the social and political context alongside the cognitive and affective components of learning" (2002:1).

The principal changes identified within the literature are increased higher education participation and changes to the mechanisms of student funding. These are explored as follows:-

1. Increased Participation - Massification

Perhaps the most significant change in higher education in recent times has been the move towards a mass system of higher learning. This began in the 1960's with the Robbins Committee on Higher Education (1963) which proposed considerable expansion in the numbers of participants in higher education in the UK from 8 to 17% for the 'relevant' age group. This fuelled the expansion of a number of Polytechnics (e.g. Polytechnic of Wales), new universities in the traditional model (e.g. the Universities of Warwick, York, Sussex, Essex and Kent) and the creation of the Open University, which developed out of the policy initiative of the then Sport, Arts and Culture Minister, Jennie Lee in the Wilson Labour Government from 1964. As such these changes, occurring in the 1960's began to increase access and widen participation in higher education.

This initial wave of expansion was consolidated by two major statutory provisions, namely the Education Reform Act of 1988 and the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 which both exerted a significant impact on higher education. The Education Reform Act of 1988 introduced the University Funding Council in place of the University Grants Committee. This altered the relationship between the state and universities, placing it, for the first time, on a statutory basis. In essence this change has meant that universities now actively bid for their share of public funding, as opposed to merely receiving a block grant. This placed universities in direct funding competition with each other for finite public resources. Such commercial and financial rivalry between universities has altered the complexion of the higher education sector. Furthermore, in relation to the impact of the Research Assessment Exercise on funding, Universities UK (2003:1) argues that the "net effect of the government's proposals for research will be a more rigid hierarchy of institutions with only a small number having access to significant research funds...Research funds that currently supplement teaching resources pay for academic staff and the ability to deliver education may suffer as a result. In some subjects, reduced funding will put the totality of provision at great risk."

The Further and Higher Education Act 1992 exacerbated these changes within the sector by removing the fundamental division – 'binary divide' – that existed between polytechnics and universities and permitted incorporation of colleges. The emergence

of the 'new' (post-1992) universities with expanding campuses and global franchising operations further emphasised the competitive nature of the relationship between universities, stimulating a quasi-market in both the higher and further education sectors.

Together these two pieces of legislation have fuelled dramatic changes within higher education which have transformed it from a;

> "...divided and quasi-autonomous sector designed largely for young adults, to a single, nationally directed and partially marketized system for learners of all ages." Hodgson & Spours (1999:96)

Academia has increasingly become commercialised and entered the world of 'big business', operating within a mass competitive market and currently a multi-billion pound 'industry'. The total income of all UK higher education institutions in the academic year 1998/99 was £12.12 billion (THES:2000)

The sector has shifted;

> "... from an elite, introspective, stable system which was traditionally producer-led to a mass, open, unstable one which is increasingly driven by the contradictory needs of its 'customers' or 'clients' – governments, employers and students." (Farnham 1999:4)

The existence of multiple universities within single cities has further fanned the flames of competition and local and regional market dominance is jealously guarded. Universities now have to compete against each other to recruit students, attract funding and ultimately secure their market position. The strength of sector competitive pressure is reflected in the announcement, on the 23 February 2001, that De Montfort University in the Midlands was to close one of its sites. The university's vice chancellor, Professor John Coyne, stated:

"The decision has not been taken lightly but takes into account the changing face of higher education and the continuing pressures many universities are experiencing at the moment." [2]

These reforms have been perpetuated by the current and major thrust to continue to increase access and widen participation in higher education. This policy emerged from the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education in May 1996, which was formed by agreement between the main political parties. It was chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (now Lord Dearing) and their report 'Higher Education in the Learning Society', issued 23 July 1997, made numerous recommendations. Included amongst them was the significant recommendation that within higher education:

Participation should be increased and access widened.

This recommendation became embodied in current Government policy and with it external pressure on the entry-gates to higher education, particularly in relation to admitting those who have been traditionally under-represented in university, was applied. By encouraging the access of non-traditional students the policy aims to improve the social equity of universities in terms of a fairer distribution of learning and subsequent employment throughout society's members. It has therefore sought to catalyse the movement of the higher education sector towards a mass system of education.

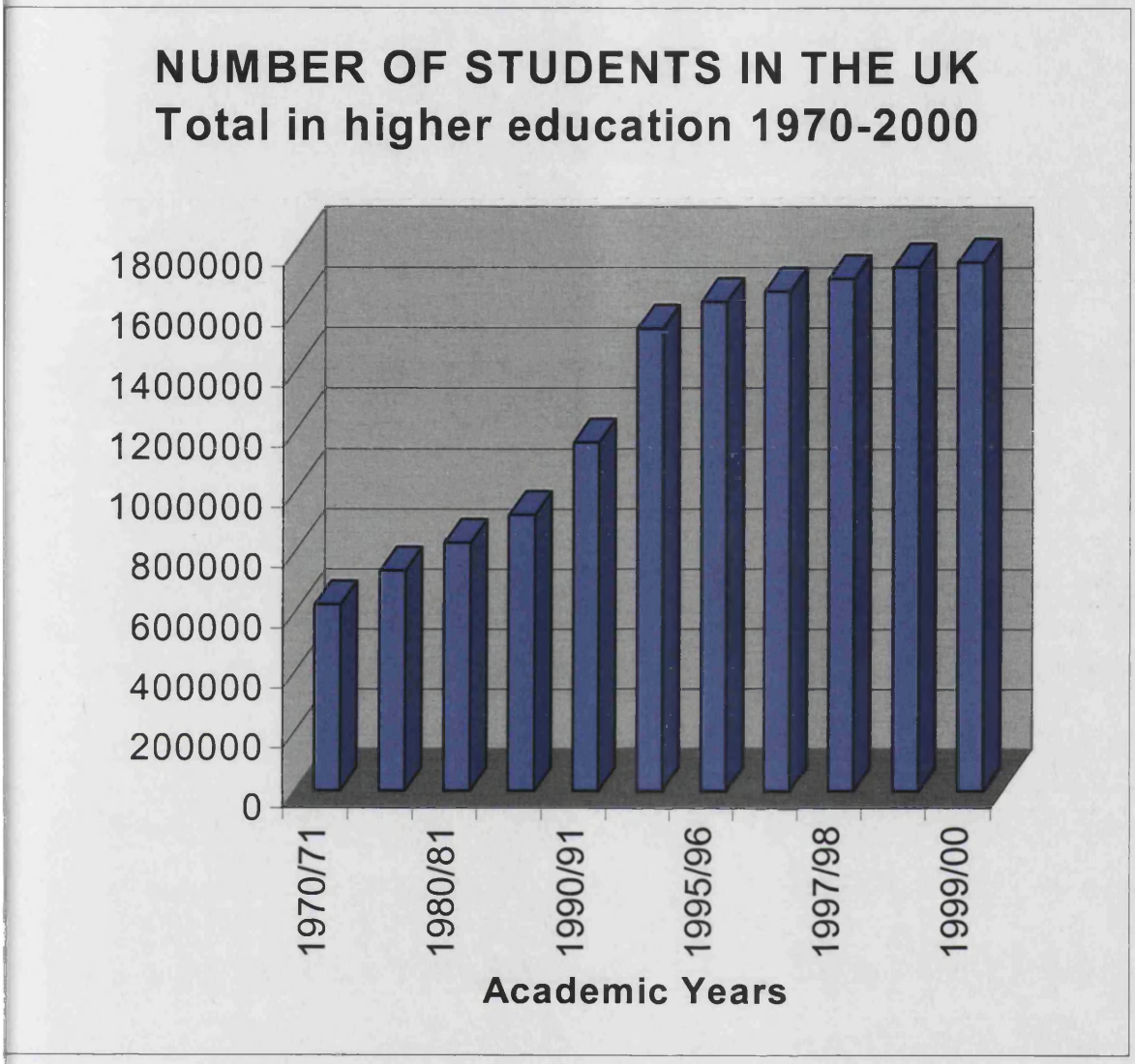
Within the higher education field, commentators refer to this increasing participation as 'massification' (Medway *et al*: 2003). Altbach (1999) identify that this term is used to include the two processes of increasing overall student numbers (participation) and increasing diversity within the student population (widening access). The scale of the transition itself has been marked:

"Since the early 1960's higher education has changed beyond recognition. There are six times as many young people going on to higher education now as then." David Blunkett [3]

2 bbc.co.uk/hi/english/education/newsids
3 bbc.co.uk/hi/english/education/newsids

Between 1995/96 and 1999/00 UK higher education enrolments increased by 8%. The total number of higher education enrolments in the UK currently stands at 1,757,200 for the academic year 1999/2000 and 1 in 3 young people currently enter higher education. Figure 3.1 demonstrates the rapid growth in student numbers over the last 30 years, which reached a peak expansion rate in the early 1990's as the binary divide between polytechnics and universities was lifted.

Figure 3.1: Participation in Higher Education in the UK 1970 – 2000



Source: Own calculations - adapted from Times Higher Educational Web Page www.thes.ac.uk.

It is not merely a picture of increasing student numbers – it is also a picture of shifting demographics. Along with the growth in numbers has been a change in the student composition within higher education. 67% of 1999/00 enrolments were full time. Part time enrolments grew by 2% from 1998/99 to 1999/2000. Over ½ of all students currently entering higher education are mature students and as such the number of mature entrants now exceeds that of 18-21 year olds (THES: 2000). Connor, Pearson, Court and Jagger (1996) demonstrate how the university student population has become more heterogeneous. They find it as formerly being made up of mainly

young, male individuals progressing to undertake a first degree as part of the natural progression of an educational process that started at the age of 5. In addition, higher education entrants were a relatively small group, less than 15% of their age cohort, studying full-time, mostly for 3 years, away from home with fees paid and maintenance grant support from public funds. Given the current profile of student entrants these former, traditional students now form the minority within the higher education sector as a whole – though still the majority in many pre-1992 universities.

Additionally, Thomas (2002: 423) argues that "many students cope with poverty, high levels of debt and significant burdens of paid work to successfully complete their courses of study." Given this, the traditional view of 'students' as 18-year old school leavers with little in the way of social or domestic responsibilities is clearly outdated. Subsequently, the idea of a common student experience of higher education effectively becomes a thing of the past, and the traditional view of universities as hallowed places of learning, enrolling only the academic elite amongst school-leavers is easily exposed as an outmoded stereotype.

One of the impacts of widening access therefore is that it leads to a more diverse student population who consequently bring with them a wider range of needs and aspirations. A large heterogeneous student population collectively catalyses change in the behaviour of the scholarly community itself. Bridges (2000: 39) states that:

> "The identity of the student community has been rendered more diffuse as it has become larger and topographically more dispersed and as students arrive on campus at different times, are largely non-resident, represent a wider span of ages and cultural backgrounds than ever before and combine part-time work with study."

Traditionally the majority of students resided away from home (during term-time) within the locality of their universities – many of them in campus accommodation. Bridges *op cit* demonstrates that this pattern of residence has changed, such that students may live further away from the University, often remaining within the family home and travelling to university. This may fragment the scholarly community and reduce the opportunity for supportive inter-student relationships to develop. This is

significant given that finding of Tinto (1993:48) that "the absence of sufficient contact with other members of the institution proves to be the single most important predictor of eventual departure even after taking into account the independent effects of background, personality and academic performance." This provides a strong argument for the need to provide opportunities for supportive, emotional and social interactions between students, such as is used within the programme developed within this research. Tinto (1993: 58) is clear that "encounters that are seen by students as warm and rewarding appear to be strongly associated with student persistence."

A further facet of facilitating widening access is that entry qualifications to university courses have become 'diversified'. The study by Connor *et al* (1996) supports this view, finding that the proportion of entrants to full-time first degree courses with qualifications other than 'A' levels had been rising slowly – 22% in 1991 to 28% in 1994. Growth in Access Course qualifications and APEL (accreditation for prior experiential learning) further facilitates the entrance of mature students to higher education.

Funding Councils have expressed concerns about policies to admit students without academic or vocational qualifications with respect to their impact on quality standards, completion rates and the consequence for a university's position in the performance tables and quality assessment. Such concerns join wider reservations by Government that the UK cannot support the higher education system that has been, which has catalysed the introduction of student loans. Moreover, there is some debate over the efficacy of restricting study areas to those that are 'useful' in an economic and future employability sense, and that the liberal view of higher education – where the process of learning is deemed more important than the topic of study – should be abandoned.

Despite these, the government's drive to increase participation continues and its aim is that by 2010, 50% of young people should have the opportunity of benefiting from higher education by the time they are 30 years of age. The government recognises that for this to happen it will be critical that more young people who come from families with no higher education in their backgrounds are encouraged and permitted to enter higher education institutions. At present (2000/01) only 28% of entrants to

higher education are from disadvantaged backgrounds. It would seem likely that there will be increasing pressure on all higher education institutions to admit 'socially disadvantaged' students onto their courses.

This raises an interesting ethical dilemma for higher education institutions. On the one hand there is the drive to include greater numbers of non-traditional students. However, on the other hand is the research evidence which suggests that higher education is not a neutral experience since non-traditional students are generally more likely to have poorer academic profiles. Hence universities may be recruiting particular students into a system that somehow unfairly disadvantages them from the outset and restricts their chance of success. The work of Bourdieu (1992) may offer an insight into understanding this paradox from a sociological perspective.

Bourdieu views education as part of culture, and one producer of a commodity termed 'cultural capital'. Harker, Mahar and Wilkes (1990: 1) explore Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital which "acts as a social relation within a system of exchange...extended to all the goods, material and symbolic without distinction that present themselves as rare and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation." As such, individuals attain aspects of cultural capital as they progress through life in response to their exposure to particular patterns of socialisation, family upbringing, use of language, attitudes, behaviour patterns and access to resources. Within the field of higher education, for example, an academic degree constitutes cultural capital.

However, Bourdieu suggests that individuals adjust their expectations in relation to the capital they are likely to attain in response to "the practical limitations that are imposed upon them by their place in the field, their educational background, social connections, class position and so forth." (Webb, Schirato and Danaher 2002: 23). This consequently leads to those who have least capital tending to be less ambitious in terms of seeking to acquire it and thus help to reproduce the status quo. Widening access policies that focus on including non-traditional students may therefore be encouraging individuals with less cultural capital to become more ambitious in terms of acquiring a degree, which within the cultural field of higher education confers an amount of cultural capital. Whilst this may be an admirable intent in terms of seeking to facilitate social equity, Bourdieu suggests that encouraging such aspiration is a

form of "gambling, largely doomed to failure... [as they] will signal in everything they do and say, their unsuitability for higher education, and as a corollary...will themselves recognise this, and more or less expect failure" (Webb *et al* 2002:24). The inequities conferred by the uneven distribution of cultural as well as economic and social factors amongst members of society therefore leads to "inequalities in life chances" Van de Werfhorst, Sullivan and Cheung (2003: 45), extending to inequalities within the higher education system.

This position of inherent inequity is described by Bourdieu (in Webb 2002: 214-215): "Those who talk of equality of opportunity forget that social games...are not 'fair games'. Without being, strictly speaking, rigged, the competition resembles a handicap race that has lasted for generations." In this way, fields (a site of cultural practice, including higher education) reproduce themselves and as such are not open to the notion of social inclusion and equity which would require more radical institutional and cultural change. This position suggests admitting non-traditional students into higher education, of itself will not achieve social inclusion. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) contest that there is a strong relationship between the possession of cultural capital and success in the education system since it assumes the possession of cultural capital – i.e. familiarity with the dominant culture in education. Such assumed familiarity makes if difficult for non-traditional students to succeed in the higher education system since, put bluntly Bourdieu and Passeron *op cit* suggest that the higher education system is run by the middle-classes for the middle-classes.

Thus, far from playing a neutral role in this inequity, the purpose of higher education itself is reduced to reproducing its own internal values which it achieves through structures, systems, curricula and a culture that is constructed, influenced and delivered by the dominant groups in society essentially for the dominant groups in society. In so doing higher education maintains or perpetuates social inequalities by playing an integral part in allocating occupational positions. This view is supported by Blackburn and Jarman (1993:205) who state that: "As the number of graduates has grown the degree has become an increasingly common entry qualification for a growing number of high-level occupations. Thus higher education has played a progressively greater part in the reproduction of the occupationally based class structure."

The mechanism of reproduction within higher education described above involves a degree of interaction (some of which may exist at an unconscious level) between individuals and the institution. This involves, amongst other things, the interaction of what Bourdieu (1977) termed 'misrecognition' and symbolic violence'. Misrecognition is a 'form of forgetting' that individuals are caught up in and produced by as they are subject to forms of symbolic violence (e.g. experiencing limited social mobility, having restricted access to resources, being treated as inferior) that they do not perceive. From this perspective, it could be interpreted that universities which admit non-traditional students into traditional systems are allowing aspects of symbolic violence (traditional teaching methods and support systems) to disadvantage these students who perceive or misrecognise this lack of 'fit' as the natural order of things, which may encourage them to withdraw.

Non-traditional students' lack of 'fit' may be displayed through their general way of being - termed 'habitus'. Habitus is a socio-cultural construct developed by Bourdieu to explain how historical, cultural and social influences and experiences are reflected in the behaviour, attitudes and dispositions of individuals – a process of "history turned into nature" (Bourdieu 1977: 78). Habitus is understood to be "durable and transposable" (Webb *et al* 2002:36), and hence remains with an individual across contexts. As such exposing non-traditional students to higher education presents them with a new set of cultural rules and contexts and results in responses which are "always largely determined – regulated – by where (and who) we have been in a culture" (Webb *et al* 2002: 37). As such non-traditional students' transition into the unfamiliar territory of higher education may be limited by their habitus. Webb *et al* describes how the unconscious dimension of the habitus in the educational field can make participants in the educational process "blind to the objective structural relations and institutions' processes that speak through them" (2002:141). Raising awareness of these relationships may help students to see through such blindness and provide students with "a set of literacies that enable us to 'read' various scenarios within the educational field and negotiate them effectively" (Webb *et al* 2001:141) The latter identifies that the habitus is capable of modification where individuals can "use their understanding and feel for the rules of the game as a means of furthering and

improving their own standing and capital within a cultural field" (Webb et al 2002: 41).

The significance of this for my study lies in the understanding that habitus is *potentially* capable of modification if students have sufficient self-awareness and understanding to be able to identify and adapt to the rules of the higher education game. Within such a system, the process of being a student and as such academic success itself may be reduced to a student's capacity for cultural adaptation! Therefore academic achievement is explained not in terms of intelligence or ability but via a student's "relative cultural proximity to the curriculum" (Grenfell & James 1998:105). Since working class students have less cultural proximity they begin their academic careers at a serious (albeit unintentional) disadvantage. Thus non-traditional students may lack the personal cultural resources to cope as easily with the higher education experience than their more culturally proximal counterparts. This is an important point, since it is not being suggested that non-traditional are less personally developed *per se* than middle class or traditional student groupings. What is being suggested is that students with less cultural capital (non-traditional students) lack personal development in a way that enables them to specifically adapt to the higher education experience. Improved student support may have an important role to play in relation to facilitating the development of students if it addresses the issues of cultural proximity. In so doing it may allow non-traditional students to find a better 'fit' between themselves and higher education.

The personal development programme within my research may therefore be a suitable vehicle – acting as a translation device – through which students can develop an understanding for the relationship between themselves and higher education institutions. The programme will seek to assist students to better understand and negotiate their positions within the education field and aim to support their ability to move across and between different field positions – thus developing 'meta-literacy' (Schurato and Yell 2000) – the ability to move into different positions by reading the situation and understanding the game.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the programme of student support in my research centres on the use of emotions and personal development. Further limited literature in the

field has begun to identify the relationship between cultural capital and emotions. Reay, Davies, David and Ball (2001) describe the impact of the lack of cultural capital within the working classes in terms of material and emotional constraints. They suggest that "...it is unfashionable to stress the continuing importance of deeply rooted material and emotional constraints" on students in higher education, and find that whilst there is a wider discussion of these material constraints, the emotional impediments are "barely articulated" (2001:863).

This silence does little to narrow the cultural exclusion experienced by non-traditional students. Giddens argues, that despite their lack of discussion, these emotional and psychological barriers are pervasive:

> "Choices are blocked, or programmed by unconscious emotions...[where] one's genogram could be seen as setting clear limits to feasible options. To see day-to-day life as an amalgam of free-choices is to fly in the face of psychological reality" (1995:75).

This reiterates, Bourdieu's (1977) view that encouraging aspiration may largely be doomed to failure as "objective limits are transformed into a practical anticipation of objective limits; a sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from places from which one is excluded."

Therefore, non-traditional students may be set at an academic disadvantage as a result of their social status, upbringing and experiences which translate into a pattern of 'unconscious emotion' that undermines their chances of maximising learning potential. As a worst-case scenario a widening access agenda that influences higher education admission policies but fails to affect higher education structures, cultures and systems may be merely engaging non-traditional students in a self-fulfilling prophecy that leads them more quickly to attrition than their traditional peers. As such relaxing admissions policies in isolation appears incapable of solving the problems of social disadvantage within higher education. Non-traditional students remain culturally remote from higher education and as such continue to be disadvantaged by the system itself. This position is supported by Tait (2002):

> "Once the non-traditional student has entered higher education, the issue of social exclusion becomes an issue of how the traditional culture, and working

practices in higher education may present more of an obstacle to successful completion for persons from some social groups than for others."

In addition to the problems discussed above in relation to non-traditional students and higher education there is also emerging evidence that suggests that widening access is not achieving social inclusion. Whilst massification may be borne of an intention to make higher education a more inclusive opportunity, it is widely agreed that "...the association between social class and educational attainment has remained intact despite education reforms" Van de Werfhorst, Sullivan and Cheung (2003:41). Egerton and Halsey (1993) concur with this view and state that despite the considerable expansion of admissions within higher education, there has been no reduction in relative social inequality.

Reay *et al* (2001:856) similarly describe the social class inequalities within higher education as intractable with "persistent overrepresentation of middle-class students." They are critical of the claims that massification is creating a more socially just and equitable higher education system, attacking the cosy view that what is being achieved is a favourable transition from an elite system of higher education to a majority or mass system:

> "There is a political rhetoric of widening access, achievement-for-all and meritocratic equalisation within mass higher education...While more working-class and minority students are entering university, for the most part they are entering different universities to their middle-class counterparts." (Reay *et al* 2001:856).

They go on to argue that "...the expansion of higher education has been of greatest benefit to the offspring of the middle-classes" (2001:858). It therefore appears that political and economic influences have replaced the relatively simple class-based inclusion and exclusion pattern of participation with what Collins (1999:229) describes as "a far more differentiated field of education".

As such the binary divide between Universities and Polytechnics – that was removed in the early 1990's – has been replaced by a "new hierarchy of institutions in which prestigious research universities have emerged as a top layer of elite

institutions...which remain overwhelmingly white and middle-class in composition." (Reay *et al* 2001:858)

Other psychosocial aspects of the non-traditional students themselves reinforce this new stratification since evidence suggests that working-class students are more likely to minimise the risk they expose themselves to when studying at university. Reay et al (2001) find that socially disadvantaged students manifest this low risk strategy through the university application process. As such disadvantaged and working class students opt to attend new universities (in line with their low expectations, and the notion of knowing one's place) which they perceive exposes them to less risk.

Reay *et al* conclude that: "Behind the very simple idea of a mass system of higher education we have to recognise a very complex institutional hierarchy and the continued reproduction of racialised and classed inequalities. Higher education is not the same experience for all, neither is it likely to offer the same rewards for all" (2001:872).

Although the specific change of massification raises particular difficulties for non-traditional and socially disadvantaged students, its wider repercussions create difficulties for most students regardless of their background.

Most students entering undergraduate programmes – particularly non-traditional students but also traditional students - have little or no direct experience of studying at higher education level. From my experience of working in a number of universities within the UK I understand the nature and approach of higher education to be typified by:

- low levels of class contact hours
- large lecture groups often sometimes containing hundreds of students
- reliance on self-directed learning
- use of more open and independent learning systems
- focus on the development of critical thinking skills and the emergence of personal ideas/opinions
- tutors facilitate study rather than direct it

Moreover, institutions may often make the assumption that individual learners actually understand their role in the learning relationship, are active participants in the learning process, and take responsibility for structuring and developing their learning. Unfortunately, students are often unaware and sometimes unprepared to meet the weight of such expectations, which may undermine their levels of self-assurance and confidence (Gracia and Jenkins 2003). They can easily become dependent on tutors (who may collude with student dependency by providing inappropriate support) and students can become accustomed to having their learning directed and, to some extent, being told what to do, think and believe, which may further erode confidence in independent judgements. This can leave students struggling with the transition that needs to be made from the more supportive and directive modes of learning they are used to, towards becoming autonomous and self-directed in their learning conception. Unsuccessful transition, or a failure to make the required level of cultural adaptation, can hinder academic performance which, more significantly, can result in student withdrawal from the course with all the associated financial and emotional costs to the student. It also raises some uncomfortable issues for universities since they effectively recruit students into a system that fails to provide sufficient support to sustain them within such a system.

Massification too has had a number of impacts on the whole of the scholastic community. Firstly, it causes staff-to-student ratios to rise (from 1:9 in 1980 to 1:23 in 1997). This creates larger classes, within which tutors have less time to spend with individual students which depersonalises the learning experience and may undermine students' chances of being successfully engaged and ultimately retained within the higher education system. As such there is an irony here in that massification (which has taken place without large-scale expansion of teaching and support resources within the sector) may itself be contributing as a deterrent to social inclusion.

This situation has been recognised by the Select Committee for Education and Employment (SCEE:2000) in their Sixth Report:

> "Increasing non-completion rates could undermine success in opening higher education to a broader spectrum of the population, put off potential students, and cause institutional instability." Section 1: Paragraph 5.

Official statistics for 1997/98 show that about 1in 5 (18%) of students drop out of university. This equates to approximately 144,000 students leaving higher education in the academic year 1997/98, at an estimated cost of £500 million. The reasons for student attrition include, amongst others, financial, personal, social, and educational reasons. Many students are simply;

> "...unprepared for the 'culture shock' of student life"
>
> BBC News August 9 1999

Aside from the financial cost to the public purse there is a significant human cost associated with dropping out of higher education. As Sir Howard Newby noted (in his response to a question about retention posed to him in the Sixth Report of the SCEE) the failure to retain students within higher education is "... something of a setback, if not a tragedy, for the student personally."

Furthermore, the incidence of student attrition is not evenly distributed throughout the student population. Studies by Paul (2001), Smith (2002), Bennett (2003) and Hall, May and Shaw (2000) demonstrate that the frequency of student drop-out is significantly higher amongst non-traditional students.

Secondly, massification also creates a heterogeneous and fragmented scholarly community, which can provide less opportunity for supportive relationships to develop between students resulting in isolation and disaffection with the learning experience. Less personal contact and support for students may mean that many students are at risk of becoming increasingly anonymous in their learning and disengaged from the learning experience. Again this may be particularly problematic for students from disadvantaged backgrounds who arguably have a greater need for support and contact with other students in order to facilitate their cultural adaptation or transition into higher education.

Collectively these changes may give rise to a tendency to view students as educational units to be processed – just number targets to achieve- which further alienates students and interferes with their personal development. This is a view supported by Barnett where universities become "a place in which knowledge is viewed as a

commodity, picked up by those who pass through, in acquiring the latest technical competencies and analytical capabilities" (1994: 13).

This creates a situation where students are objectified; becoming the passive products of higher education within which the subjective experience and active process of learning is devalued. Scott (1984) concurs with this view and holds that the modern emphasis has shifted from knowledge as a *process* to knowledge as a *product*. Such an outcome focus compromises the deeper nature of higher learning – reducing its status to a more technical and vocationalised level. Higher education in some respects may be confusing higher learning with professional training.

Gibbs too is critical of this treatment of learners as educational objects, and warns that it:

> "...threatens increased alienation for students ... and may lead to rejection of the deep, intrinsic learning and personal development brought through the search for academic excellence, replacing it with attributes of education which are solely instrumental to success in employment." (2001: 86)

Such alienation is difficult for any student to overcome, but for socially disadvantaged students this may represent a further barrier to their academic success. As such the rapidly changing higher education environment is possibly presenting particular difficulties to students as it "...runs out of control and leads to persons being forgotten in the interests of economy or in the frenzy to achieve so-called results." (Mearns and Thorne 2000:7)

Professor Yorke (2001) discusses how higher education might respond in the face of such rapid change, suggesting that subject content in a degree programme becomes less important (i.e. the product is de-emphasised) and what becomes more important and relevant is the process of learning to learn.

Rogers (1994) too had written of the impact of wider changes on education. He, like Yorke, believed that as the world surrounding education was changing rapidly, education itself must respond to this. Within such a current dynamic context:

> "The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned how to adapt and change; the person who has realized that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than on static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education in the modern world". (Rogers 1994:152)

These writers therefore suggest that the current dynamic environment and the requirements of the knowledge economy results in continuous changes and advances where it no longer makes sense to concentrate on knowledge transfer within higher education, since existing knowledge becomes out of date very rapidly. It may be preferable for higher education to respond to the current climate by focusing on the development of students that engages them in a process of learning that creates an ability within them to be flexible, creative lifelong learners who are crucial to the success of contemporary society.

Other writers including Gibbs recognise this and are critical of the economic and political drivers of the rapid changes taking place within higher education:

> "Things have drifted to the point where the 'skills talk' of employment has taken centre stage in higher education institutions, dwarfing any other aims proposed by Robbins or Dearing and changing the humanitarian ideal of liberal education into a necessity of economic and political imperatives." (2001: 87)

Gibb's view is that, whilst accepting that higher education contributes to the social well-being of its host community it should also include "wider educational aims of developing students in their own right" (2001:87).

There is increasing support for this view that universities may be reduced to a series of 'learning factories' where "the enrichment by critical reflection on one's own learning as an authentic and socially responsible adult is lost" (Aronowitz 2001: 17).

Whatever the causes of such rapid changes within higher education it appears vital that more effective student support strategies are warranted, to assist students to navigate these changes. Shona Paul - in a recent Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (ILTHE) and Standing Conference of Principals (SCOP) sponsored symposium on widening participation and promoting student retention in London on 27 September 2001 - stated that Higher Education Funding Council in England (HEFCE) was concerned that non-completion rates would rise with widening participation and that more specific attention needed to be focused on student support and retention.

Massification of the higher education sector and the current knowledge economy therefore present important challenges to higher education in terms of providing truly accessible and meaningful learning experiences for all students, including non-traditional students.

The literature suggests that higher education's response to calls for widening access and contributing towards greater social inclusion is not being met with a universal response since sector benchmarks reveal that support of the widening access agenda is restricted to certain institutions (notably the 'new' universities). This offers non-traditional students restricted access to higher education. Furthermore, universities that do afford access are still not rising to the challenge of including non-traditional students since they permit them to enter a system that appears neither prepared, able nor readily willing to sustain them and their needs. Retention data suggests that simply opening the door to non-traditional students is not achieving social inclusion. Changes need to push much deeper and further than access policies into the very fabric of higher education. This would require the rules of the higher education game (its structures, systems and practices) to change - i.e. in order to remove the systemic inequality and bias higher education's institutional habitus needs to adapt.

The eradication of such cultural bias in the ethos, structure, systems and curriculum of higher education – what Armstrong, Armstrong and Barton describe as the challenge to "the reproductive role that organisational practices play at all levels in constructing differences and in promoting inequalities based on these differences" (2000:9) – would require radical change. This does not appear feasible without widespread

recognition and understanding of the problems and a willingness to instigate policy change.

In the absence of available evidence that the higher education sector itself is prepared or willing to change, it appears that appropriate student support is a possible means of assisting students to manage the impact of the bias within the academic field - smoothing their transition and working towards their retention.

This compromise solution would support non-traditional students in a way that raises their awareness of self and their situation, such that their cultural adaptation is expedited. Providing or increasing levels of personal support in this way (as contested within this research) seems vital if *all* students are to maximise their learning potential.

The need for such programmes is recognised. 'The Excellence Challenge', produced by the Government (DfEE) in 2000b and containing its proposals for widening participation in higher education emphasises the need for higher education institutions to offer "...better support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to seek to ensure that they are retained once they enrol in higher education."

Ottewill (2002) describes the adverse impact that massification and the vocationlised emphasis within higher education is having on students' motivation and attitudes to learning. He suggests that many students, (especially non-traditional students who are the specific recruitment targets of many institutions), are coerced and pressurised into studying at university and are therefore largely extrinsically motivated. This colours their view of higher learning as a means to an end rather than as a valuable process of growth and meaningful learning experience in its own right. Ottewill describes the symptoms of this condition as students being easily bored, over-reliant on their tutors, needing learning direction, unable to be autonomous and responsible for their own learning, demonstrating an aversion to all subject matter and material that is not explicitly linked to the assessment process, concerned with satisficing rather than optimising their learning, and an antipathy towards helping and supporting their peers.

My research therefore attempts to offer a remedy to these problems, in a way that responds to calls by Ottewill to focus on "...giving attention to the affective (as well as the cognitive) dimension of education...[and] utilising more creative approaches to learner support." (2002:2)

That student support is at the heart of mitigating the effects of massification is a view also shared by Professor Mantz Yorke of the Centre for Higher Education Development at Liverpool John Moores University. He concurs with the need for greater student support and stated (within the ILTHE and SCOP symposium on student retention referred to earlier) that the current student support system in the UK "is a shambles!" Through his studies on retention he suggests that there are a number of key factors that encourage retention including:

- a supportive institutional culture
- individual support for first-year students
- an accentuation of the social dimension of the learning experience

Yorke's 1999 study on student non-completion demonstrated that the influences on withdrawal included such factors as 'poor quality of student experience', 'inability to cope with the demands of the programme' and 'unhappiness with the social environment'. What is clear from this study is that effective student retention is about much more than academic issues. 38% of Yorke's sample of student withdrawers (N = 2,151) cited 'lack of personal commitment', 24% cited 'lack of personal support' and 23% cited 'emotional difficulties with others' as moderate or considerable influences on their decision to withdraw. Clearly the personal and emotional aspects of learning have a significant role to play in the quality (and all too frequently) longevity of the learning experiences. This raises some clear issues for higher education institutions in terms of recognising the role of emotions in the learning experience and addressing this personal dimension via appropriate student development and support mechanisms.

Smith also holds that higher education expansion is a major contributor towards falling retention rates. Again, he is clear that the remedy lies in the need to

"...support students' learning experience and to ensure their success...One of the main tensions for universities is the competing pressure between increased student numbers and the need for individualised learning" (2002:1). Here Smith recognises the two central and adverse impacts of massification outlined earlier, namely, the depersonalisation of higher learning, and the increasing heterogeneity amongst the student population as significant factors. Collectively these impede higher learning by failing to address the individual and personal learning experiences of students since students' learning no longer fits into "...a standard model...based on young, professionally inexperienced, full-time students living on a campus" (Collis and Moonen 2001:9).

The need for effective student support and development within the current higher education climate is clear. Moreover, there is also a good degree of agreement that the optimal stage at which to provide support is at the point of entry – i.e. during the first few months of undergraduate study. Assistance is, therefore, most beneficial at the earliest stage of the higher education experience (transition) since this is when the pressures students face are most acutely felt. Yorke (1999) demonstrates that nearly half of those students who do not complete their studies, withdraw during their first year of study. Hatt (2002:2) concurs with the importance of early support holding that the first term is "...a very significant phase in the student lifecycle as most drop-outs occur during the first year and these early weeks are often decisive in shaping student commitment."

The literature therefore indicates that students present as more vulnerable during the early stages of their academic careers. This is especially true of non-traditional students who have no experience, background, association or clear expectation of what the higher education experience is likely to bring. Effective transition is concerned with smoothing a student's entry into university and engaging them at a very early level. Successful transition (in terms of timing and degree) seems crucial if students are to maximise their learning potential whilst at university. Many institutions spend vast amounts of time and money on recruiting students with huge marketing campaigns and polished clearing procedures. Ironically, this is often in sharp contrast to the sparse amount of resources that are used in retaining students. Consequently student retention has become a cause for concern across the whole of

the higher education sector. Student withdrawal is costly in terms of the financial and emotional cost to students and the lost income stream to the institution, and is a situation that appears to be exacerbated by current Government initiatives. This criticism is expressed by Lange (1998:56) "...the government has been too concerned to raise numbers entering higher education at the expense of its quality, and with no real economic argument to back this expansion."

Whilst it is accepted that access is vital to creating inclusive education, it is also recognised that early and sustained retention strategies are necessary to prevent the haemorrhage of students (particularly in the early stages of their studies) and thereby more actively work towards a socially inclusive higher education system. This view is reiterated within the opening statement of the Sixth Report of the Select Committee on Education and Employment (23 March 2001);

> "Access to higher education is not only a matter of getting in to university; it is also a matter of staying in and emerging in good standing."

It is obviously not enough to merely recruit students from whatever background. This has to be reinforced with adequate transition and retention policies and practices. Layer suggests that: "The Government policy objective to widen participation will not be achieved if broader groups of students are 'admitted' to institutions that have support infrastructure and curricula designed for students from a narrower pre-HE experience" (2000:11). Student's lack of preparedness for higher education was also a key concern of the Select Committee (Sixth Report).

In addition, Connor *et al* (1996) demonstrate that inadequate student support was one of the areas receiving most criticism from students – especially mature students. The level of support generally was felt to be inadequate. Specific student criticisms included the lack of personal contact with lecturers, and inadequate personal support, which was cited as a factor in the increasing dropout rates at some universities.

Similarly, in their study of non-traditional students within university Hall, May and Shaw (2000: 5-6) found that many of them "expressed feelings of uncertainty, insecurity and even fear of the education process...[and] it became clear that students

required help in boosting confidence, and in becoming more aware of what would be required of them." Hall *et al*'s results also suggest that low self-esteem, fear and lack of understanding of the learning process and isolation from other students are the key obstacles to the transition of non-traditional students into higher education.

Interestingly, Hall *et al* also found that traditional study support systems and self-referral personal tutorials did not assist the students in developing the skills and confidence they required. In some cases it actually exacerbated the students' difficulties since the support offered was viewed by them as 'remedial treatment' and this created negative connotations which further damaged their already flagging self-confidence. They conclude by suggesting that widening access must be accompanied by increased student support that is appropriate, embedded in the curriculum, uses peer groups, and is available to all students. As such, successfully widening access requires a lot more than simply recruiting a different pattern of students. It also requires that the systems within higher education be adjusted to accommodate these different students -opening the door is not enough.

What is emerging from this body of literature is that within the big business of higher education, students, particularly disadvantaged students, need support to develop themselves if they are to effectively manage their learning. Bell (1996:28) holds that "...changes have affected the nature of the student experience. External change has implications for the internal world of the student."

My research builds on the identified need within the literature to support students (particularly non-traditional students) at this current time within higher education, by seeking to integrate a system of student support that focuses on non-traditional students in particular as they commence their higher education experience. The need for developing and introducing such systems at this particular time are deepened when the impact of changes to student funding are also considered. It is to the changes in student funding and their impact on the student body that this chapter now turns.

2. Student Funding

Changes to the structure of student funding strikes at the very heart of the student experience. Until 1990 full-time UK based students studying for a first degree received 100% grants for maintenance, albeit means-tested according to parental income. In the early 1990's student grants became a political target of the public purse and grant rates were frozen at their 1990/91 value. This move was a first step towards replacing the existing format of student funding with the loan system. In 1994/5 reducing the level of grant rates and increasing loan rates accelerated the shift from grant to loan finance.

A further recommendation of the National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education (1997) was that:

> All graduates make a flat-rate contribution of about 25% of average tuition costs (equivalent to about £1,000 per year).

For the first time new entrants to higher education in 1999/2000 received support for living costs solely through loans, which were partly income-assessed. Students from lower income families continued to receive free tuition whilst other students paid £1,000 per year depending on parental income. Maintenance grants for living costs ceased to be available (except for some limited allowances, e.g. for students with dependants, single parent students and disabled students) being progressively replaced with a loan system. The amount available to students through loans has increased to compensate for the reduction in grants. Repayment of these loans is linked to income after leaving university so that leavers only repay as and when they can afford to. Some 724,000 students received a loan in 1999/00 representing some 74% of those estimated to be eligible for a loan. Total loan payments amounted to £1,823 million in 1999/00 (DfEE:2000a).

Such a funding structure creates a student population that is typically debt laden within the first few months of study and frequently in debt to the value of several thousands of pounds on graduation. "The number of undergraduate students in higher education institutions has increased rapidly, cuts in per capita funding have squeezed university resources, and a shift in maintenance grants to loans has placed students under greater financial pressure" (Winn, 2002:445). To cope with this situation

students often work in paid employment, sometimes full-time, to supplement or provide their student finances. This creates a blurring of the distinction between part-time and full-time study.

> "The distinction between full- and part-time study has been eroded, by many students undertaking paid work during term time..."
>
> Select Committee – Education and Employment – Sixth Report – Section 1: Paragraph 9

Working students are now the norm rather than the exception. More significantly, their outside employment responsibilities impinge on the available time they have to devote to their studies and also have the potential to disrupt regular study patterns and energy levels if they are required to work shift patterns or anti-social hours. Balancing the requirements of a programme of higher education study with regular and ongoing paid employment requires a level of self development to successfully cope with disruptions to study patterns, erosion of available time, balancing priorities that generally challenge a student's resolve.

Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that changes to funding have increased the level of alienation that working-class students may perceive between themselves and higher education. Research suggests that "...socio-economic groups IIIM, IV and V tend to be far more debt-averse than the middle classes...Changes in the funding structure have therefore made it less likely that these socio-economic groups will consider higher education as a realistic option." (Hatt 2002:2). Furthermore, a 2000 NATFHE report agrees that "...young people from socio-economic groups IIIM, IV and V are significantly less likely to enter higher education" and that even if they do enter higher education they are "...more likely to enrol on courses at new universities , which have higher drop-out rates and lower teaching income per student than the elite universities in the Russell group." As such, changes in student funding towards debt finance are a further cause of exclusion and division amongst different 'types' of students and their distribution across the higher education sector. Furthermore, it is somewhat ironic that changes to student finance – instigated by government - may be a significant entry barrier to non-traditional students despite the current Government's

focus on social inclusion. To this end the Government is thwarting the chances of succeeding in achieving its own targets and meeting its own agenda of social equity.

As well as changes to student funding resulting in many students undertaking employment responsibilities, there is also a large growth in the entry of mature students into higher education who have childcare and other domestic and financial responsibilities. This creates a situation where students far from having study as their main priority are trying to balance other significant social, domestic and economic responsibilities as well as their studies. This can render such students vulnerable to the stresses of academic study, which in turn can adversely impact upon their academic performance and ultimately their progression. It seems likely that many of these students will be unfamiliar with higher education as a process or experience and consequently will require support to facilitate their transition into and retention within higher education.

The literature in this area therefore demonstrates that the erosion of student funding has resulted in more students undertaking paid employment This, together with higher education's particular encouragement of mature students to enrol who typically have more financial, domestic and social responsibilities has fragmented the scholarly community. Opportunities for students to engage with other students may therefore have been disrupted. "Expansion has had far-reaching consequences for the student experience. Many of the mature students who entered higher education in the 1990's were able to do so only by strategically juggling coursework with domestic responsibilities" (Lauder and Cuthbertson, 1998). In addition, for students, affordable childcare is scarce (Gristock, 1998) and those in greatest need of childcare, particularly lone parents are often the most financially disadvantaged (Callender and Kemp, 2000). Furthermore, Edwards (in Winn: 2002) found that it was not only practical but organisational matters that affect mature women's capacity to study. For example, many of the mature women she interviewed experienced "intense resistance by partners and other family members to their participation in higher education" (Winn 2002:446). Collectively these further emphasise the importance of higher education institutions developing a range of support strategies to facilitate higher learning.

Conclusion

The impact of the current changes in higher education, particularly massification, on the student experience have been discussed. These changes are particularly evident in terms of increasing numbers of non-traditional students and exacerbate the pressures all students are under which in turn increases the need for the development of appropriate support mechanisms. Students are now of all ages and life stages, with different motivations to study, having a mix of financial support including employers, public funds, and parental and personal contributions and facing a range of domestic, social, employment, family and financial pressures. Mature students range from 'deferred beginners' to 'returnees' and 'enrichers', each studying in different circumstances, for different reasons and putting different demands on the institutions. Socially disadvantaged, working-class and other non-traditional students are being specifically targeted by institutions in order to respond to Government drives to achieve greater social equity within the sector. Such students are often culturally remote from the curriculum, structure and ethos of traditional higher education. As such they are educationally disadvantaged by the system of higher education itself. Within such a system many students are struggling and as such there is a clear need to support the transition, or cultural adaptation of non-traditional students into higher education and to promote their personal development so that they can achieve their full learning potential.

Mearns and Thorne (2000) demonstrate that in such times of rapid change it becomes progressively more difficult for individuals to develop. As such it is precisely at these times that more support is needed to assist the personal development of students. An indication of the extent of the changes currently affecting UK higher education is given by Warner and Palfreyman (2001) who begin their analysis of the current state of the sector with an extensive list of the current changes taking place that spans several pages! In addition Antonacopoulou and Gabriel (2001) suggest that: "In particular, periods of rapid and perplexing changes make extreme demands on individuals' and organizations' abilities to learning and on their emotional lives" (2001:435). Clearly, students are not only faced with entering higher education and all the problems that such a big life change brings of itself, but also entering a

dynamic situation where a mass system of higher education is being created. This exacerbates the pressures and difficulties that students face. Major changes including increasing student numbers, drives to widen access and increase participation, a fragmented and diverse student population, larger classes, and greater anonymity, depersonalise the system and collectively increase the pressure students are under to establish and flexibly self-manage their learning. This is made clear by Mearns and Thorne:

> "In a changing higher education environment the forces driving students' distraction have never been stronger." (2000: 37)

Students are therefore having to rely on their own personal and emotional resources to sustain themselves within higher education. The literature demonstrates that non-traditional students are disadvantaged within such a system because they do not possess the extent of cultural resources or capital that their traditional student counterparts do. When such personal resources are not sufficiently developed students may not be emotionally robust enough to maintain their learning and ultimately their studies. Changes thus affect students' perceptions of and relationships with, their tutors, fellow students, the institution and more importantly themselves and their learning. As such the need for emotional and personal development programmes that build on and strengthen existing levels of personal development is intensified by the current climate of higher education. Without their provision non-traditional students are vulnerable and exposed to pressures which may undermine, disrupt or even extinguish their higher education studies altogether.

Within the literature review of Chapter 2 I identified the need to incorporate emotions and personal development into higher education and also the need for improved systems of student support. My research therefore contends that these two current gaps can be addressed together by designing a better system of student support that is based on incorporating emotions and personal development into higher education. Within Chapter 3 I have considered the current context of higher education and discussed how current changes, particularly massification and changes to student funding are exacerbating the need for better student support. As such the need to develop and integrate more effective student support systems within higher education is intensified by the changes that are taking place in the sector.

The next chapter of the thesis builds on the identified needs for personal and emotional development and better student support in contemporary higher education and describes the use of person-centred principles to create the particular programme of student support that is being developed within this research.

Chapter 4

The Creation of a Personal and Emotional Development Programme for use in Higher Education

Earlier chapters 2 and 3 have exposed, through an examination of the literature, the need for 'better' student support systems relevant to the needs of non-traditional students, as well as the need to integrate the emotional and personal aspects of learning into higher education in order to enhance higher learning and support both transition and retention. These needs have been shown to be particularly acute at the present time within higher education as increasing numbers of non-traditional students are entering higher education and leaving it – via early withdrawal!

Despite its support for the role of emotional and personal development within higher education, the literature offers little guidance on how emotions might be practically integrated into the higher learning curriculum. As such their development remains largely omitted from the higher learning agenda as the sector continues to focus on the cognitive and rational components of learning. However, further literature (discussed in Chapter 2) supports the suitability of the ethos and principles of the person-centred approach as a basis for supporting and improving higher learning. This chapter builds on these foundations by using the findings of the person-centred research to develop a programme of personal and emotional development to support students in higher education and as such addresses the first of the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, namely:

- How can a structured programme of emotional and personal development that draws on person-centred psychotherapy principles be integrated into contemporary higher education?

This chapter is therefore concerned with describing how the personal development programme used within my research with first year undergraduates entering higher education was developed and is structured as follows:

Firstly it describes the influence of myself within the research. It progresses by discussing the integration of the person-centred principles into this research – i.e. the practical application of the principles and ethos into the research via the creation and development of a personal development programme as its practical research instrument. Thirdly it moves on to consider the relevance of each of the 'topic areas' within the programme to the students' higher learning experience. Lastly it discusses three key practical features of the programme namely; the use of small groups as the means of delivery, the use of self-reflective data; and the use of silence as a tool of self-reflection.

The creation of a personal development programme

I became a full-time university lecturer at the University of Greenville (pseudonym) in 1993, having just completed my undergraduate degree within the institution. I was a mature student of twenty-four having returned to undergraduate study when my first child was 2 years of age. As such I have a rather unique perspective of being both a student and tutor within the department – at the time of the research being a senior lecturer within the school. I also have a good degree of insight into the issues surrounding non-traditional students – having entered higher education from a working class background as a mature student with childcare responsibilities.

From 1993 my role within the division expanded considerably to include a range of activities and areas of responsibility, including teaching, student support, management, administrative, external representation, and research roles and responsibilities. Perhaps the most significant of role (from my perspective) that I undertook was that of pastoral tutor within the school. Pastoral tutoring involved offering individual support to students (primarily through discussion and information sharing) to overcome or endure whatever difficulties or issues they had. These issues were very wide ranging and included family, housing, financial, relationship, personal, health and social matters. Within the department in which I was working there were two pastoral tutors (myself and one other tutor) who undertook all of the pastoral support work with students. Students were encouraged to make appointments to discuss any difficulties they experienced, but the department also encouraged staff

to use an 'open-door' policy for students, so many arrived without prior notice. As such the pastoral tutoring role was a particularly challenging and demanding one, but one that I found extremely rewarding and meaningful.

From the outset I recognised the critical role that student support played not only in terms of student transition and retention (the latter having been identified earlier as a particular problem within the department), but also in terms of its impact on the personal and humanistic, learning experience of students. To support and improve my work with students I trained as a person-centred (based on the Rogerian philosophy) counsellor at an adjacent university, where I gained my Postgraduate Diploma in Counselling in 2000. This training directly improved the quality and appropriateness of the support I was able to offer students. In addition my experiences of working with students stimulated a particular interest in the area of student support generally, especially as I was often exposed to the 'front-line' consequences of students who were being inappropriately and inadequately supported and advised by what I perceived at that time to be a weak and inappropriate system of support.

This research consequently grew out of my awareness of the weaknesses in the current system of student support (based on the traditional model) allied to an increasing interest in developing the effectiveness and efficiency of the support I could potentially offer to students especially within the dynamic and changing environment of higher education. In particular I became increasingly frustrated at the reactive, 'fire-fighting' and often punitive approach to student support that we were operating, which seemed very inadequate.

The predominant features of the support system that was being operated within the department at that time included:

- Provision of a designated year/academic tutor with mandatory visits/discussions expected of students each term.

- A comprehensive, front-end loaded, 3-day induction programme, which mainly comprised information giving and guided tours of available facilities.

- Close monitoring of attendance and investigation of any absenteeism.

- Introduction – via a pilot scheme – of the development of Progress Files that encouraged students to reflect on the development of their academic and technical skills and abilities.

- Provision of two departmental pastoral tutors.

- A centralised student services department offering a range of advice, support and information services on request.

Whilst it appears that there were numerous avenues of support available to students, it was my view that the current system lacked any conceptual framework, and as a consequence had been allowed to develop in a rather incoherent and ad-hoc manner – constructed through a series of knee-jerk responses to developing issues. This 'fire-fighting' approach left me constantly having to react to increasing numbers of students in a way that left me questioning how effective this system of support was. Others professionals charged with the pastoral care of students including Peelo (2002) shared my feelings of inadequacy:

> "By the late 1990's, I had become aware of changes in my learning and support work that were hard to pinpoint; a sense of unease, an awareness of meeting a few increasingly desperate students." (2002: 1)

Furthermore, despite this ever-growing raft of support measures offered and available to students at Greenville, still the dropout rates kept rising. Somehow these often elaborate support measures were not able to support students in a way or at a time when it was required. Perhaps this was to do with the increasing numbers of students who were what Bourdieu described as 'culturally remote' from higher learning and as such they did not respond to the way the current, and traditional, support system was structured and operated. Alternatively we may not have been very adept at anticipating the type of support that students needed, or not provided it in a way that was available and accessible to them. Willmot and Lloyd (2003) in their work on student support state that:

"The impact of widening participation upon students themselves, especially those who might feel a sense of cultural alienation or who lack the assumptions we take for

granted, is only now starting to be recognised and we still have some way to go if we hope to address its implications" (2003:2).

I began to consider how the system of pastoral support that was being offered could be improved in order to reach those who were culturally remote, socially disadvantaged or otherwise alienated within the existing higher learning structure. Crucially Yorke (1999) suggests that such students have a rate of withdrawal that is almost twice that of their counterparts. I began this process by identifying what I perceived to be the weaknesses within the current system as follows:

- Uses a traditional system of student support that has been developed for use with traditional students. A failure to recognise that such a system may provide little support for students who fall outside this narrow classification.

- No consistent basis for pastoral tutoring system within the university – different departments were using different systems. This is a problem for the increasing number of students who study across departments, creating a disjointed and confusing system of support for students, and failing to offer parity of support across the institution.

- Using elements of compulsion (e.g. meetings with academic tutors) and punitive sanctions (e.g. reporting poor attendance to local authorities and other funding providers) within the support system.

- Being a reactive system that is reliant on the students' ability and desire to seek out support. Many students do not overcome these barriers and are unable to come forward to be supported.

- No real dissemination of good practice or sharing of ideas between pastoral tutors – each operating in a largely autonomous, unsupported and unsupervised manner. This questions the adequacy and appropriateness of the support that is being offered and leaves pastoral tutors exposed and isolated themselves.

Increasingly pastoral tutors are expected to have the solutions to the thorny problems of student retention within the university.

- Despite a raft of student support initiatives, student dropout rates continued to rise across the institution. This suggests that the system of support is inefficient at least as measured against this raw statistic.

- Much of the student support work uses a 'hand-holding' and solution focused approach. This is problematic in that it is not offering the right kind of support in terms of being inconsistent with creating developed and independent learners. Inappropriate types of support can collude with students to create a climate of dependency. This type of support does not offer a real opportunity for students to develop self-responsibility and self-reliance, which are also essential ingredients of higher learning. To this extent it is possible that inappropriate student support is damaging in that it impedes transition into higher education rather than facilitating it.

Through an increasing awareness of these weaknesses I began to consider using personal development as a better and more active way to reach and support students before problems arose, or at least in terms of equipping them with the skills necessary to better cope with subsequent difficulties. Such a system could overcome the rather fragmented and reactive system of support in current use that often offers the wrong kind of support. The development of a more cohesive and strategic model of student support that addresses transition, retention and humanistic issues both within the school and across the university, became the subject of this PhD research. My thesis therefore draws on my particular expertise and knowledge of students developed through my pastoral and research activities.

Drawing on the established applicability of person-centred principles to education (discussed in Chapter 2) I began to create a personal development programme that synthesised the principles of the person-centred approach to psychotherapy with relevant ideas drawn from the areas of learning and education. From the earlier literature I was aware that any system of student support could only be effective if it

was specifically tailored to the needs of the students it sought to support. Change is therefore best achieved when the student is actively engaged with the process and "...is key to encouraging learning to learn. This is not only in respect of the development of the intellectual, critical capacities but also in terms of the necessary examination of the emotional aspects of learning" (Rawson 2000: 234). As such its development required a continuous and iterative process undertaken by myself in collaboration with the student participants. I felt that such collaboration was important in order to secure the relevance of the programme to the needs of students and also to foster control and ownership of the whole developmental process amongst the students at the earliest stage.

The programme uses a humanistic perspective and therefore views learning in terms of personal growth. In this way I drew on my earlier integration of learning theories and conceptions (see Table 2.1) to position the personal development programme being developed towards achieving conception F type development which encourages students to engage with their learning as an active process that uses a 'being' disposition. From within such a paradigm, the purpose of education is to support an individual's growth by increasing their awareness of themselves and others. "The theory underlying this approach is phenomenological...the educator must enter the learner's phenomenal field and understand the learner's needs." (OU 1984:42)

Specifically the programme uses the following person-centred principles within its design:

- Works with small groups of students.
- Focuses on feelings and the personal aspects of learning.
- Aims to increase self-awareness and encourage active self-reflection in order to promote personal responsibility and self-reliance towards learning.
- Provides a therapeutic focus that is exploratory, facilitating the discovery and development of the self.
- Operates principally through dialogue and conversation.
- Is process orientated and experiential in nature.
- Uses relationships as its principle driving mechanism.
- Allows its direction to be student-led.

At its simplest level, this programme of personal and emotional support aims to offer some redress to the gaps identified earlier (see Chapters 2 and 3) in the thesis, namely:

- The failure of higher education systems to have adapted to the needs of a more diverse student population, and especially the needs of non-traditional students.
- The lack of cultural capital that many working class entrants to higher education suffer which compromises their retention and academic achievement.
- Escalating levels of student withdrawal and referral, especially amongst non-traditional students.
- The continued use of inadequate transition programmes.
- Unfounded expectations that students entering higher education understand how to learn and are familiar with the institutional habitus of the higher education field.

My personal development programme seeks to develop students to enable them to fully engage with the opportunities that are available to them in higher education by understanding and taking control of their learning and actively connecting with it. The programme is primarily focused on the feeling and emotional aspects of learning - responding to the gap identified in the literature - which is consistent with the humanistic perspective: "Humanistic educators regard the emotional aspects of learning as particularly important, because they believe most learning is enhanced (or diminished) by the emotions that accompany it". (OU 1984:42)

My programme therefore seeks to support students by assisting them to make sense of what is happening inside themselves and in the learning environment that surrounds them and developing them to be able to effectively relate to that sense by deciding on appropriate actions or responses after discussing and considering alternatives.

The programme has a number of specific aims at an individual and institutional level outlined in the following table:

Table 4.1: Individual and Institutional Aims of the Personal-Development Programme

Individual Aim	Institutional Aim
Focus on feelings and personal development within higher education to support students' learning	Engage with learning to maximise learning potential
Develop realistic learning expectations and understand the unspoken 'rules' of higher education	Support the transition of students – particularly 'non-traditional' students into higher education
Develop meaningful learning relationships that integrate emotionality into the education experience to enhance higher learning	Reduce reliance on mitigating circumstances support
Increase levels of self-awareness, personal reflection and personal responsibility towards studies	Support students in learning to learn
Develop ability to recognise and manage feelings within the learning situation	Add value to the learning experience
Acts as a translation device, interpreting the higher education system to the student and facilitating cultural adaptation	Develop compatible expectations of tutors and learners, less educational stress and failure
Work holistically with students to build confidence and self-esteem that maximises learning potential	Enhance learning outcomes

It is important to clarify at the outset the type of development work that is being undertaken within this research. My programme focuses on *personal development* i.e. working with individuals (or groups of individuals) to develop the personal aspects of those individuals. Rawson (2001) makes an important distinction between personal development (development of the person) and self-development (development by the

person). He views personal development as a broader category that encompasses the whole of self-development and as such goes beyond skills development and asserts that all of 'learning to learn' falls within the precinct of personal development.

The type of development used within this research is therefore consistent with Rawson's view and holds that personal development is central to study support and must extend beyond traditional study skills programmes. Peelo suggests that too often there is the simple assumption that "...when study has gone wrong, there are techniques available (study skills) which can be applied quite regardless of the individuals and their lives" (1994: 5). Clearly the notion that study skills training is the panacea for all study difficulties is a simplistic solution to a complex problem. Rowntree suggests that what students really need is support that enables them to develop "...the ability to reflect on their own academic experiences rather than searching for the one correct way to study. A reflective student has a sense of purpose, can develop strategies to meet their own as well as institutional requirements and understand the situation in which they are working" (1991:12). My research is informed by and responds to this by offering students an opportunity to engage in personal development that involves a degree of change, includes the whole person and is brought about largely through reflection.

In terms of providing this support, Lovell (2003) finds that the first year of undergraduate study is crucial in terms of developing student-centred learning. He agrees with the earlier findings of James and McInnis (1995), and holds that despite the vital importance of this first year experience, within universities paradoxically "...first year teaching had a low status...not much thought went into it...Inexperienced and/or part-time staff were heavily used ...[and] students weren't given a good foundation for their learning" (2003:2). Yorke (1999) demonstrates that the distribution of student withdrawals does not have an even frequency across the academic year. They are most frequent in the first-year of undergraduate study and primarily concentrated in the first few weeks of the first term and in the few weeks falling either side of the Christmas vacation. As such the early weeks are the most vital time for offering student support. This research accepts this view of the importance of the early higher education learning experiences to successful study, and

as such the development programme is integrated at the beginning of students' academic life.

Another important aspect of the development work undertaken within this research is that it is personalised. Peelo (1994:25) suggests that when it comes to learning "...we have our own academic fingerprint" i.e. we are all unique individuals created by our individual circumstances, background and experience. Because each learner is an individual it is not possible to effect learner development in a generic, standardised and external way. Personal development of the learner may therefore be best effected by supporting students to become self-understanding, self-aware and hence better able to cope or overcome the personal barriers and obstacles that they may face during the course of their studies. It is really about empowering students to be their own support systems.

This obviously involves engaging students in a process of change. However, it must also be remembered that change is an inevitable part of learning "...facing new challenges and developing new strategies for overcoming them is a part of intellectual growth" (Peelo 1994:16).

The personal development programme used in this research provides a practical medium through which the process of change can be stimulated. This process does involve a certain degree of 'intervention'. Heron (1986) identifies categories of 'interventions' which can take place between a client and a practitioner. Such interventions successfully 'fit' into the teacher and learner interface and include:

- Prescriptive – advising/prescribing a course of action
- Informative – giving information
- Confrontational – opposing and challenging
- Cathartic – learner allowed to express emotions as a release
- Catalytic – stimulating the learner
- Supportive – sustaining the learner

The particular development programme created in this research uses all of these intervention approaches at various points as appropriate.

As mentioned earlier, the personal development programme began as a loose framework of topic areas – informed from the literature - which with the students I expanded, set-aside and re-developed as the programme progressed. This allowed the students to take control of their own development, to set their own agenda and address areas important to them within the context of their learning experiences. The ability to put aside my own 'plans' for the programme was essential if the students were to experience relevant and self-controlled development. To this end my planning needed to be very fluid and flexible.

This approach resulted in the following programme structure detailed in table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2: The Structure of the Personal Development Programme

Week	Synopsis of discussion area
1	Establishing personal meaning as a starting point. Why am I studying at university? What am I hoping to achieve in both the short and the long-term? What does it mean to me to be at university?
2	Developing realistic expectations. What am I expecting the higher learning experience to be like? Do I know what is expected of me as a student? Do I know what to expect of tutors? What are my expectations of myself as a learner? Do I understand the 'rules of the higher learning game'?
3	Working with tutors. How do I feel about my tutors? Am I realistic about my expectations of them? Am I able to develop learning relationships with my tutors? Am I able to approach them for support? How can I get the best from my tutor?
4	Personal learning. What is my learning approach? How do I feel about my learning? How do I feel about participating in the classroom? Am I preparing enough? Am I aware of, and using available learning resources? How do I feel about the level and format of the study I do outside of the classroom and do I feel I am doing enough? How do I feel about my relationship with my learning?
5	Building self-esteem and self-confidence. How do I feel about myself, and do I understand those feelings? Am I realistic about how I feel about myself? What are my strengths and abilities? Where could I improve? How will I overcome my fear of giving verbal presentations?
6	Understanding failure. How do I feel about failing? What does failure mean to me? Why has it happened? What happens now? How can I recover my failure? Does it alter the way I see myself? How will I tell my parents/others about it?
7	Self-awareness issues. How do I feel about myself? Can I recognise and understand those feelings? Am I able to manage my emotions? How do I

	deal with the stresses and pressures of student-life? Do I know where I can get help if I need it? How do I cope with my negative feelings?
8	People skills – developing relationships. How do I feel about the other students in my tutorials? What do I expect of them? Are these realistic expectations? How do I behave as part of this group and what motivates this behaviour? Am I tolerant of others? Am I aware of other people's needs and feelings? How do I use this awareness? How do I feel about influencing other people? Do the others like me? Do I feel I 'fit in' or do I feel rejected?
9	Communication skills. Am I able to communicate my ideas to others? Do I contribute to classroom discussions? How do I feel about sharing my ideas and views in the classroom? Why do I feel this way? Do I expect others to contribute? How do I feel when others don't make the effort? Am I making myself understood? How do I listen?
10	Taking control and responsibility. How do I feel about taking responsibility for and control of my learning? How do I feel about my learning approach? Do I self-initiate my own study? How do I feel about my level of achievement to date? Do I plan my own learning? Do I achieve enough?
11	Encountering problems and overcoming difficulties – managing change. How am I feeling about my studies? How do I feel if there is no right answer? Can I use personal judgements? Can I be critical of myself? Self-belief and positivity. How do I feel and respond when I start to struggle? Do I feel under stress and how am I coping with this?
12	Personal reflections. How do I feel about this first semester? What has studying at university been like for me? How do I feel about it? What difficulties have I encountered? How have I changed? Am I adapting? What strategies can I use to overcome my difficulties? What do I need to do now to prepare for the next semester? Where can I get help if I need it?

Each of these 'topic' areas was arrived at through discussions with the students over the weeks that the programme took place. Ideas were not decided up front, but allowed to develop and arise as studying progressed. Whilst the programme benefits from this small degree of structuring, it still provides flexibility within the learning framework of each session, so that relevant issues arising can be included. Rawson supports this view that personal development is best facilitated using "...group work that is structured to probe the areas of personal development that support the view of learning to learn..." (2000:12). As such the development and content of the programme was allowed to fully reflect and be directed by the student participants. This maximised its relevance to their individual needs.

Key facets of the resultant content of the personal development programme are discussed in the following section.

- **Personal meaning**

Students were keen to begin the personal development programme by sharing their early feelings and experiences and by considering the immediate impact of beginning their higher education studies. This is a period of immense change for students who, on arriving at university can often "...feel overwhelmed by the sheer anonymity of an institution...dwarfing students and making them feel that they are merely one of many. This is a dangerous situation from the perspective of retention. Students can easily disengage from the institution, or merely fade away, as they feel that they do not count or that no one really knows them." (Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbrigue (2001: 55). Within such an environment it is easy to understand how students may withdraw or detach themselves from higher education. Clearly the development of personal relationships with individual students at this early stage is crucial in what Moxley *et al* describe as 'anchoring' the student to their studies.

Latham and Green (1997) suggest that the 'sink or swim' mentality often adopted by universities towards students is grossly inadequate in terms of supporting higher learning, which is in line with the literature reviewed earlier which stresses the need to forge personal links with students, particularly as they commence their university studies. All too frequently this translates into somewhat trite and often inadequate induction programmes. These usually take the form of a few days of students being herded around the institution, bombarded with information and 'talked at' rather than discussing issues with students in their own time. Smith suggests that "...students can feel overwhelmed or marginalised by mass induction programmes and it is important to ensure that they feel valued and included from the outset" (2002:4). Beder (1997, in Collins and Lim 2002:2) agrees that the process of student transition is complex: "They need to find their way through a new territory, to acquaint themselves with a new culture; negotiating a new identity for themselves; becoming socially integrated into the institution; as well as acquiring new learning and generic skills." In addition, the 'one-size-fits-all' standardised induction programme appears increasingly ill fitted to a student population that is diverse and heterogeneous. Such a mass and standardised approach can depersonalise and impede a student's chance of

establishing personal meaning for themselves within such an anonymous environment at this early and most crucial stage.

Research is therefore suggesting that as educators we need to help students to "...understand why they want to be involved in higher education, understand the student role...and eliminate the barriers that can undermine their success." Moxley *et al* (2001:147). Within my programme it is accepted that there is therefore a clear rationale for linking students' reasons for studying to their aspirations, if their learning potential is to be maximised.

I used this understanding to focus my early discussions with students on how they felt about coming to university, encouraging them to reflect on what it meant to them to be here. I also structured the development programme so that it worked with small groups of students, was personal, long lasting and flexible to the needs of the individual. To this end, I was attempting to address the inadequacies of the traditional induction programme, which tend to be short, factually based, impersonal and very structured around what the institution decides students need to know.

- **Realistic expectations**

After attempting to encourage students to recognise what being at university meant to them as an individual, I moved on to encourage them to consider what their wider role was within the institution, i.e. what was expected of them in their role as a student. This was really an early attempt to respond to the earlier understanding derived from the literature that students are enrolling into an established system and structure of education and the importance of them recognising their position within this. Through these discussions I sought to make explicit the nature of the relationship between the individual and institutional habitus.

Most students who participated in the personal development programme could be classified as non-traditional students (see later student profiles) and expressed a lot of early confusion as to their role as students within higher education and the expectations they held of themselves and those that others held of them. These early

feelings are consistent with the literature which indicates that many students, particularly non-traditional students who have no background in higher education need support in developing realistic expectations of themselves as students and of their tutors as the facilitators of their learning, and that effective support is crucial to their academic success.

The work of Bell suggests that students need to actively manage their transition into higher education: "Students need to leave behind what has gone before and to look forward to what is to come. They need to become attached to the institutions and to their subject, to make friends and to form a working relationship with those who will teach them...Many students have, for the first time, to manage their own finances, to balance basic needs and have a social life with the costs of accommodations, books and equipment" (1996:85).

Moxley *et al* (2001) undertook a substantial piece of research into student retention in further and higher education. They suggest that the increasing rates of participation in higher education have a dramatic downside, reflected in the startling non-completion rates on an international scale: Japan 10%, UK 20%, Germany 28%, United States 37% and a staggering 45% in France. Failure to complete courses of study in colleges and universities is clearly offering higher education one of its greatest challenges, namely how to prevent students from dropping out. They hold that the pathway to retention lies in a proactive, personalised and integrated support programme that helps each student to "...learn the role of the student and to master the expectations and requirements that compose this role through a support system that is relevant to their needs and that helps them to achieve their aspirations." (2001:11)

As a consequence awareness building was integrated into my personal development programme to facilitate, amongst other things, cultural adaptation in a way which serves to interpret the educational institution to the student. I sought to enable students use of the personal development programme within my research to build their self-awareness, allowing them to make sense of the higher educational landscape and interpret the institution and its requirements in a way that they could understand, relate and respond to. My programme recognises the importance of spending time

explaining the role of the student and in supporting entrants to higher education in becoming responsible and autonomous students.

Further research suggests that effective student support should be proactive and "...reach out to individual students, ...form strong and enduring relationships with students that are positive in tone...help students to gain insight into the student role...and helps them to be successful within that role" Moxley *et al* (2001: 103).

My research is influenced by this perspective and as such the weekly sessions sought to draw out students' experiences through deep discussions, the developmental work had a strong relationship focus. In addition - using the understanding drawn from the retention literature in Chapter 3, of the importance of support at the beginning of students' educational experience - I began the programme at the same time as students' higher learning began and as such did not wait to respond to difficulties, but attempted to act to prevent such difficulties arising in a proactive manner.

In addition to developing realistic self-expectations of the higher education experience overall, early discussions with students also revealed that they perceived a need to have a clear expectation of how their role and that of their tutors interact within the higher learning process. This appeared significant since research by Collins and Lim indicates "...an obvious disparity between the expectations of academic staff: what they expect students to do and how they respond to perceived student needs, and what students themselves expect of university life" (2002:1). The existence of this 'expectations gap' is also highlighted by the work of Gracia and Jenkins (2002) who found that successful undergraduate academic performance is in part linked to a student having realistic expectations of their role and that of their tutors.

Further research by Collins *et al* (2002) offers some insight as to the 'causes' of this expectations gap. They suggest that the inability to reflect; poor time management and communication skills; low self-confidence; inappropriate tutor support in terms of colluding with student weaknesses; an inability to take personal responsibility for learning; and a lack of independence in their learning as common factors contributing to the development of unrealistic student expectations.

These factors hold relevance to my programme and therefore I sought to include discussion of these issues within the programme, in order to provide students with an opportunity to better understand the nature of the relationship between themselves and their tutors – so that they could become more aware of their position and role within this relationship.

Establishing a realistic understanding of the role of students and tutors within the learning relationship is important. The literature acknowledges the impact of mismatched student-tutor expectations including Adler, Milne and Stringer (2000:120) who interviewed university educators and found that "...several expressed the view that students perceived teachers who adopt the role of facilitator as shirking their teaching responsibilities...students believe their role in class is to be lectured to and not asked questions". However, further research indicates that: "Breaking students expectations can be difficult. In fact most [tutors]...relented to these student expectations, feeling that their time was better spent satisfying, versus seeking to change, their students' expectations. The unfortunate result is that educators often end up designing learning activities of a small bite, context free, black and white nature...versus activities that are interdisciplinary, context rich, and are shaded different tints of grey" Adler *op cit* (2002:120). To some extent, tutors are in danger of colluding with students to create a culture of dependency amongst them because it causes us (as tutors) less discomfort than the constant challenging of passive attitudes amongst students.

Adler *et al* suggest that the 3 perceived impediments to student learning are "...lack of student readiness, inadequate educator support mechanisms and non-reflective education practices" (2000:132). To this end I aimed to provide opportunities for students to explore, through reflection, what the roles of both student and tutor are within higher education. In this way the personal development programme offered an opportunity to address the source of this potential learning impediment as described by Adler *op cit* by challenging unrealistic learning expectations and seeking to replace them with realistic alternatives through the provision of appropriate and reflective support mechanisms as advocated by the literature.

- **The Impact of Tutors in the Learning Relationship**

As students' exposure to higher education progressed through the early weeks of their courses of study, students began to describe the difficulties they experienced in relation to the interaction between themselves and their tutors. The earlier literature (see Chapter 2) describes how over-reliance is often placed on the intellectual and critical dimension of the tutor-student interface and also demonstrated that increasingly the emotional and personal aspects of this interface are equally important. Recognising this emotional dimension may provide tutors with an opportunity to enhance the quality of the learning partnership that they are engaged in with students.

Brown (2002) demonstrates the links between academic performance and emotional issues stating that: "There is a counselling element in teaching, just as there is a learning element in counselling. Fostering co-operation and understanding is crucially important ...for developing a supportive environment in which academic excellence can flourish" (2002:143). Palomobo Weiss (2000) also emphasises this need to foster emotional connections not only between the student and their learning but also between the student and their teachers. In that research it is held that teachers create the learning situation which if perceived to be threatening, intimidating, humiliating or disinterested, fragments learning. It further holds that creative thinking and deeper connections are made in learning situations that are supportive and where students are in control of their learning. This appears to be especially important at the onset of new programmes of learning where there is a particular need to "...ease learners into new approaches and to lessen their anxiety" so as to create a less threatening learning atmosphere (2000:47). This reinforces the need for early measures to support students' transition into higher education, especially in relation to non-traditional students.

The acceptance of emotion as a critical component of learning, as suggested by the literature, is an idea that is central to my research. What I have sought to do is make explicit use of emotions and the personal dimension of learning in order to better understand their impact on student experiences. One aspect of these experiences is the relationship they have with their tutors and as such my research seeks to capitalise

on any benefits of creating an emotional link between a tutor and students – on a learning level - by specifically encouraging and providing and an opportunity for students to develop this.

Ironically, it appears that the higher one moves educationally the more emotionally sterile and remote the learning relationship can be. Evidence of this may lie in the experience of students – which is more fully explored later in this research. However, it appears likely that massificiation creates larger class sizes in which students may become anonymised. This may de-personalise the learning experience, by eroding the time tutors have for individual students and encouraging students to be viewed collectively as identical sub-sets of a cohort rather than as unique individuals. This may adversely affect students in that they are stripped of their individuality and it may become harder to offer appropriate academic support and encouragement to students that is pertinent to their individual needs. In the absence of a personalised classroom experience it may be beneficial to use a system of student support that assists students' development such that they can manage their own learning and are enabled to flexibly manage difficulties and pressures as they arise, such as the one developed in this research.

Providing personalised support was therefore important within my research and I sought to offer an approach that runs counter to any trend towards detached, de-personalised learning and seeks to engage the emotional and personal aspects of learning. In addition, I became aware as the programme progressed that the development sessions themselves had the potential to act (in some respects) as a microcosm of the student classroom. Within the sessions students had an opportunity to develop skills and an understanding of higher education and themselves, that aimed to allow them to begin to take control of the discussion, their feelings and ultimately their learning.

For such a personalised approach to be successful it was necessary to create a safe environment within which students could express feelings, share experiences, discuss issues, practice skills, behaviours and new abilities and knowledge and consider their transference and use in their everyday learning. However, in the classroom, students' experience (or as one student put it "come up against") other tutors who have a

different view of the power-balance between tutor and student. Crucially it appears that tutors have to *allow* students – via tacit permission – to take control of their learning. However research by Bannister, Hanson and Ottewill (2002:37) suggests that some tutors do not give this unspoken permission. They termed such tutors 'maximalists', and characterised them as those who give too much instruction and direction to students – e.g., "...by stating how much time students should devote to studying each element of out-of-class study, providing course guides, dedicated open-learning material and surgeries." This may undermine the opportunity for students to control their own study and manage their own learning approaches, strategies and resources. In contrast, other tutors argue that self-managed learning is all about the principle of 'reading for a degree', and that too much support results in a "...dependency culture, which they considered the antithesis of higher education"(2002:37). These tutors are ascribed the term 'minimalists'. The research argues that patterns of higher learning are more readily fostered and facilitated by tutors who adopt a 'minimalist' approach. Influencing the disposition (or some aspects of the habitus) of individual tutors is beyond the scope of this research. However, it became apparent through discussions within the programme that students as part of their everyday learning experience were exposed to a variety of approaches amongst different tutors. My response was to incorporate the exploration and understanding of the impact of these variable tutor approaches on the individual students. To this end the role of the personal development programme in this regard was to enable students to recognise and understand different tutor approaches and more importantly adjust their response to these. In this way I sought to reduce the impact of inconsistencies between different teaching approaches, which can cause considerable confusion and a lack of a coherent teaching and learning experience within institutions, and thereby lessen any potential disruption to students' learning. The personal development programme in this regard seeks to support students to 'cope' with a wide variety of tutors – which is to be expected – by adjusting their response to them, since it is not possible for students to change the tutor's approaches to teaching and learning.

- **Personalising Learning**

Entwistle suggests that: "Students describe 'good teaching' in terms of clarity, level, pace, structure, explanation, enthusiasm and empathy. The first four provide the basis for a deep [learning] approach, but it seems to be the final 'three-E's' which encourage students actively to engage with the course in ways which lead to understanding" (2002:3). In addition, Farmer and Eastcott (1995) suggest that explicit discussions with students about learning approaches can be useful in enabling them to reflect on their existing practices. This acknowledges the role of the human dimension in learning – empathically engaging and actively encouraging students as they undertake their learning. Entwistle (2002:4) progresses by calling for "...a consistent interest in how students are learning" in order to adequately support student in becoming deeper learners.

As discussed in Chapter 3, learning-to-learn is becoming an essential life skill, particularly within the current knowledge economy. As educators we need to respond to this by "...expanding our view of knowledge to embrace the personal knowledge and development that is necessary for the learner to start learning to learn." (Rawson 2000: 233)

This recognition of the importance of the 'humanness' in interactions with students lends support to the efficacy of the person-centred approach to student support. I used a personalised approach throughout the sessions and sought to express my genuine interest in students and develop meaningful relationships that assisted them to maximise their learning potential, and promote their active engagement with the process of learning-to-learn. The programme also provided a regular and consistent forum which students appeared to come to rely on as a safe space within which they could be assured to be heard and responded to.

- **The Role of Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence**

Students were keen to discuss how aspects of themselves impinged on their learning. This seemed particularly apparent in relation to self-perceived levels of self-esteem and confidence. The impact of these personal characteristics as described by students is consistent with the literature, where Abouserie links levels of self-esteem to the

development of improved approaches to study. The work calls for "...programmes for enhancing students' self esteem...to increase students awareness of their motives and intentions and help them to control their resources and monitor their levels of performance" (1995:24).

As such, by focusing on these issues raised by students my personal development programme was able to acknowledge and explore the role of self-esteem and self-confidence in students learning experiences. Low levels of esteem and confidence may erode a student's self-belief and undermine their ability to actively participate and engage fully with their learning as Perry observes; "...a student as he loses confidence in himself, tends paradoxically to fall back on less and less productive methods of learning" (1971: 123). Such student responses may directly impair learning and further research reveals that:

> "Statistics collected in the 1990's show females entering university with higher marks than their male cohorts. However, it is the men that end up with the most firsts. The reason given for this surprising turnaround is that men have more confidence than women, which makes them more likely to take risks when answering exam questions." (Cannon 2002: 74-75)

Cannon continues by suggesting that "...those who serve higher education must do all they can to boost the self-confidence of students...[who] must be encouraged to feel that they have something special to contribute" (2002: 83). Snell (1988) concurs with the importance of supporting or at least maintaining levels of self-confidence amongst students since his research also finds that feelings of success or failure directly assist or restrict learning respectively.

Supporting and enhancing self-confidence therefore emerges from within the literature as another important consideration in terms of enhancing the effectiveness of students' learning within higher education. Given their potential impact I felt that this area was an important aspect of personal development relevant to students and as such were included within the programme.

In addition to the impact that Cannon *op cit* suggests self-confidence has on a students' learning approach, impaired levels of self-confidence may also impinge upon a student's learning by restricting their ability to freely participate, question and challenge within the classroom – i.e. affecting their learning behaviour. This may be especially relevant in contemporary higher education where many learning environments may have restrictive social climates and increasing sizes, which make it difficult for students to admit that they have not understood something. Cahn suggests that: "Too often, the admission of what a student knows or does not know carries...a price of embarrassment or shame – of ugly anxiety than which anything else is better. And so the student's condition...stays locked within him" (1986). Cahn *op cit* suggests that this is not unlike the view of Maslow (1968) that students prefer psychological safety over self-actualisation, often preferring to adopt a 'half-sleep' position rather than risk themselves by revealing their 'limitations'. Mace also concludes that: "Lack of self-assurance is perhaps the most serious emotional disability in the intellectual life" (1977:118-119) and holds that most students suffer with a deficiency of confidence. Loss of self-confidence is therefore recognised within the literature as a potential and significant impediment to effective learning.

Furthermore, widening access is raising questions about the academic calibre of students that are currently attending university, many of whom might previously not have been admitted. Lovell (2003) refers to these as the 'new' students, describing their primary higher learning 'handicap' as lower levels of self-confidence which amongst other things manifests itself as a reluctance to speak and participate – what could perhaps be perceived as student passivity.

The psychological literature is therefore suggesting that a student's 'choice' to become passive may, in part, be linked to personal perceptions and feelings of self-esteem and confidence and that non-traditional or 'new' students may be more susceptible to making these passive and restrictive learning behaviour choices. The sociological literature – especially through the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the notions of cultural capital and habitus – may provide an alternative conceptual framework for understanding the choice processes of these particular students and therefore provide insight into understanding these responses, useful in terms of developing individuals to challenge these responses.

In Chapter 3 I discussed how social status may confer certain material and cultural advantages onto the middle classes that privileges their ability to succeed within higher education. Conversely, "working-class families experience more economic and physical constraints and lack the same knowledge of the system and social networks that encourage the reproduction of privilege" (Reay *et al* 2001, in Archer, Hutchings and Ross 2003:16). Such class differentiation also influences the distribution of risk: "The history of risk distribution shows that, like wealth, risks adhere to the class pattern, only inversely; wealth accumulates at the top, risks at the bottom. To that extent, risks seem to strengthen, not to abolish, the class society" (Beck 1992:35). Within the higher education arena, Archer et al (2003:16) suggest that "choices and participation is an inherently more risky, costly and uncertain 'choice' for working-class groups than for middle-class groups." As such non-traditional students may perceive greater personal risks and constraints within their learning experiences which causes them to frame their learning decisions and influence their habitus through the selection of 'safe' or passive forms of learning behaviour. The perception of the need to 'fit-in' or 'feel safe' may therefore inhibit the active engagement of non-traditional learners that restricts the development of their learning conception.

Within the education literature, Yorke (2001) contends that self-belief is a key factor in student success and that such self-belief is disproportionately lacking amongst non-traditional students. Beginning academic study with low levels of self-belief can easily translate into a variety of 'achievement-sapping outcomes'. Yorke suggests that these may include a belief that failure is due to a lack of intelligence, which can lead to an attitude of 'learned helplessness'. This makes students vulnerable and when difficult tasks are encountered it may prompt thoughts of giving up.

Whether the cause of low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem is linked to inherent personality traits, personal experiences, perceptions of social status, perceptions of risk or the possession of cultural capital, what emerges from the literature is that students require a base level of self-assurance or self-confidence to enable them to be active participants in the learning process. They need to feel sufficiently self-assured in order that they can risk revealing what it is they have not understood in order to progress and develop. As educators it is incumbent on us to

respond to such deficits and actively work with students to maintain and develop the personal attributes that will enable students to bridge the transition. Student support strategies that incorporate self-belief, esteem and confidence raising may therefore be crucial to the issues of transition, learning-to-learn and retention. This understanding influenced the design of my personal development programme by seeking to develop individuals to understand the 'choice' processes and through such understanding provide students with a platform from which they better control and influence their learning behaviour and approach.

- **Coping with Failure**

As students' learning experiences progressed, they inevitably approached their first experiences of formal assessment in higher education. This raised a good deal of anxiety amongst students (discussed later in Chapter 7), which they discussed within the groups. The major cause of this anxiety was expressed as the fear of failure. It seems a little odd that despite the common occurrence of failure within higher education, students frequently perceived it as a 'taboo' subject of discussion between themselves and their tutors. Research undertaken by Yorke (2002) concludes that withdrawal or failure is more probable when, amongst other things:

- Students come from working class backgrounds or are mature entrants
- Students' expectations are not met
- Students experience financial difficulty
- Demands of other commitments supervene.
- The academic culture is unsupportive (even hostile) to learning

As such non-traditional students who come from working class backgrounds, may be older or have childcare commitments, financial commitments and with potentially less well developed expectations of higher education may be at most risk of academic failure. Given the prominence of failure, both in terms of its linkage to retention and the significance of it in the perceptions of students this became a further area included within the personal development programme.

- **Self-Awareness and Relationships with Others**

My study accepts Rogers' view that "... learning to learn embraces more than intellectual activity. It involves understanding and dealing with personal perspectives and aspects of self that interfere with the achievement of personal potential" (1994:4). Carl Rogers held that the key to unlocking learning potential was the development of self-awareness. Furthermore he held that developing self-awareness necessitated a journey of personal development involving the engagement and exploration of the whole person. This view of learning as extending beyond skills and knowledge acquisition and extending into self-development and personal change is wholly consistent with the remit of higher learning. As such within higher education, learners have to be flexible and engage in a way of being that enables them to be "continuously involved in a self-conscious learning process" Whitston (1998:318). The literature suggests that emotional development programmes may be an appropriate vehicle for delivering the support that "...helps students to address the anxiety or fears the student role creates, and helps students to address the uncertainties that role changes or transitions can induce...[This] can facilitate a transformation in the student's sense of self to incorporate values, perspectives and conceptions of self that are consistent with the aims of the educational course" (Moxley *et al* 2001:99).

Whilst the predominant focus of my thesis rests with exploring the relevance of personal development (as understood and informed by the psychotherapeutic field) to students' learning, I also recognise that learning is a complex phenomenon. As such I have sought to integrate ideas across other fields including a sociologic perspective to enhance any insights into the impact of my programme on students' learning. Whilst my understanding of self-awareness and its impact on learning is largely informed by the psychotherapeutic literature – as a facet of a person's emotional development – it is also an area where the sociological literature, particularly in relation to the notion of habitus, may offer a further insight into its development. As discussed in Chapter 3, individual student's possession of cultural capital may be linked to their ability to 'fit-into' and succeed within higher education. If this is the case I have suggested that one mechanism of supporting those students who possess less cultural capital (non-traditional students) may be to raise their understanding of the wider cultural and social experiences that have shaped their habitus – i.e. to raise their self-awareness not

just of themselves as individuals but also in relation to the external forces of class, privilege and risk that also impact upon their learning conception. In this way it may be possible to raise self-awareness of both the endogenous and exogenous factors that combine to fashion an individual's self-perception.

As such, within my personal development programme students were provided with the opportunity to develop their self awareness and understanding of themselves within the wider context of their social and cultural experiences and of those at play within the higher education environment in order to develop a better 'fit' between themselves and their learning. Achieving such a 'fit' between students and the university requires an individuated focus. However, undertaking the work within small groups enabled the development programme itself to be a psychosocial process – combining the consideration of both the psychological and social aspects of students and their learning.

- **Establishing Control and Responsibility for Learning**

The personal development programme within my research places personal responsibility at its core. Gibbs (1981:87) view of significant learning is that it requires a level of "personal autonomy and responsibility from the learner." He moves on to state that: " Developing as a learner is a continuous process, and unless the student takes responsibility for this process – for becoming aware of how he is learning and noticing what works and what does not – then change will be impeded...self-evaluation and self-awareness should be encouraged."(1981:88)

This is a view shared by Rogers:

> "Learning is facilitated when the student participates responsibly in the learning process. When he chooses his own direction, helps to discover his own learning resources, formulates his own problems decides his own course of action, lives with the consequences of each of these choices, then significant learning is maximised."
>
> (1969:162)

Dart concurs that "...learners must have control over their own learning, as the responsibility for learning and sense-making resides with individual learners" (1998:31). Others including Mann also support this view of student control as central to effective learning; "...the learner is sundered from their own learning process...by the imposition on the student by lecturers of the choice of the timing, content and process of learning tasks. It is not the learners who own the learning process, but the teachers...These particular social and power relationships contribute to the student's sense of alienation from others, from their teachers and potentially from other students." (2001:14)

Mann suggests mechanisms for reducing the alienation that students may feel. These include "...providing safe spaces in which students are accepted and respected, and in which unformed, ambiguous, non-rational, illogical, unclear ideas, expressions and play are welcomed and listened to, we can nurture creativity, the desire to learn, and the coming to voice" (2001:17). She also suggests "...redistributing power in the educational process in such a way that students can exercise power over their own learning and development." (2001:17)

Rogers also stressed "the importance, for teachers and others educators, of understanding a person-centred philosophy of learning and having the commitment to follow through with giving freedom to students." (Rogers 1994:204)

Traditional higher learning is often characterised by the tutor being seen as the possessor of knowledge, power and authority over the student, who is positioned as a passive, powerless and obedient recipient. Within such a relationship there is little room for trust, democracy and there is no place for the whole person as a learner, only the intellect. The personal development programme used within this research aims to redress this imbalance by placing the student at the centre of a process of development allowing them to gain control over their own studies.

My decision to use the person-centred philosophy as a basis of support, was not only based on the literature which indicates its use in supporting students, but also because the principles of the person-centred philosophy are also linked to characteristics of higher learning itself. Brookfield (1986) supports the importance of student control and offers a particular view of self-directed learning: "At its heart is the notion of

autonomy, ...the possession of an understanding and awareness of a range of alternative possibilities...concerned as much with an internal change of consciousness as with the external management of instructional events." (1986:58)

My experience of working with students leads me to believe that students do want opportunities to be responsible and take control of their learning, but as tutors we have to 'allow' this to occur. We need to relinquish some of the control that we have over students and their learning to enable and empower them to take control of it themselves, because without control, responsibility is impossible. This transfer of control is essential if we are to allow students to develop "...capacities for independent and self-managed learning." QAA 2002: 4.1 (iv)

The personal development programme that I am developing here, builds on this understanding by addressing these issues of control and responsibility through the provision of a safe, emotional space where students are unconditionally accepted and encouraged to express their feelings, to self-understand, and take control of their learning in an attempt to maximise their learning potential.

- **Developing Reflexivity**

Being critically reflective is a central and embedded tenet within the person-centred approach used within my development programme. Gibbs suggests that:

> "Above everything else, it is the encouragement of students' active reflection about their studying which is the cornerstone of their development...Awareness and reflection are not merely symptoms of developments in learners, they bring about the developments. It is through engaging students in reflecting upon the process and outcomes of their studying that progress is made." (1981: 90-91)

Brown, Fry and Marshall suggest that reflection has "...a central part to play in transforming and integrating new experiences and understanding with previous/existing knowledge...It is something which works best with engagement and proactivity on the part of the learner." (1999:207)

I integrated this understanding by using active reflection to encourage open discussions and self-exploration, each week engaging students to reflect on their experiences and review their learning development. This approach sought to promote understanding of and insight into their student role, responses, behaviour and self in order to support them in becoming better learners and reach a state of readiness by "helping students to strengthen or expand their identities and self-concepts as students" (2001:116 Moxley *et al*).

An important element of such a reflective approach is the development of robust communication, including listening skills. Since my personal development programme relied on discussion and active listening, students were able to practice and develop these communication skills. Within each session students were encouraged to hear each other, to actively listen. Such 'genuine' listening is described by Griffiths. "The mental process of listening is an active one...Genuine listening also has an emotional dimension since it requires an ability to share another person's feeling, and understand their situation." (1999:105)

The ability to actively listen and reflect are also directly transferable into the higher learning situation which helped to assist the consistency of students' personal development in line with their learning needs.

The chapter so far has detailed the creation of the personal development programme and discussed how through collaboration with students and with reference to the literature, particular key areas became included within it. The chapter now progresses by discussing three key practical features of the programme, namely: small-group work and self-disclosure, self-reflective data (researcher generated), and silence. These are each considered in turn in the sections that follow.

(i) The personal-development programme and the use of small groups and self-disclosure.

The nature of humanity is that we are a social species. As such groups are an everyday, and fundamental characteristic of human society. Payne (1998: 125-9)

identifies three different 'types' of group which he structures into the following classifications; socialist-collectivist, individualistic-reformist and reflexive-therapeutic. The first type focuses on issues arising from inequalities within the fabric of society e.g. gender effects and power imbalances. The second focuses on helping individuals adjust to situations they find themselves in e.g. changing entrenched behaviour patterns and learned responses to issues. The latter seeks to assist individuals within the areas of emotions, relationships and personal growth, e.g. overcoming problems of self-confidence, self-belief and developing communication skills in ways that are meaningful and purposeful for the individual. The personal growth model used within this thesis uses an eclectic approach that combines elements from across different classifications of group work identified by Payne. It is concerned with issues arising from the impact of the established society, structure and convention of higher education on different 'types' of student (socialist-collectivist); it is also concerned with assisting student transition into higher education and enabling them to understand the often unspoken rules of the system (individualistic-reformist); and it is also concerned with facilitating the personal and emotional development of students as they journey to become higher learners (reflexive-therapeutic).

I decided to undertake the personal development within the group setting in order to capitalise on the beneficial effects that the literature (discussed below) suggests this format has to offer. In particular, creating a co-operative learning group adds a social dimension to the development work, where experiences are shared and areas of commonality are revealed. Sharing in the experiences of others helps individuals to make sense of and understand their own experiences and to identify shared feelings and experiences which helps to break down isolation. It also provides an experiential relative against which individuals can 'measure' their own experiences and hence gain a fuller understanding of these experiences and themselves. This view is reiterated in the findings of Brookfield who suggests that: "As adults find their experiences echoed in the accounts of others, and as they react to, support and build upon the contributions of various group members, enthusiasm and genuine engagement in the encounter begin to develop...participants experience a sense of mounting excitement, anticipation, and real exhilaration as group members recognise

their own lives in the accounts of others" (1986:62). The insights of others can clearly cause group members to reinterpret or re-evaluate their own experiences. Griffiths too believes that: "It is within the small group that self-confidence can be improved, and teamwork and interpersonal communication developed". (1999:97)

Within each of the personal development groups, I allowed the student discussions of each of the issues arising to be free-flowing and open, keeping my interruptions or contributions to a minimum. Gibbs suggests that using such "...unstructured and open, undirected discussion...brings about student-centred self-directed learning" (1981:93).

Rogers agrees with the value of using small groups within which students can "...build solid, personal, first-name relationships...develop friendships with other students; and make progress in discovering who they are underneath the usual façade" (Rogers 1994:55). He is clear that: "A very important example of a development that fosters a climate for significant learning is the co-operative learning group." (1994: 203)

Dart offers some insight into how group work brings about such significant learning and emphasises "the importance of social interaction in bringing about changes in understanding...Peer collaboration is essential to the learning process, as learners construct meaning and understanding through active participation and sharing of knowledge." (1998:31)

Others, including Rawson also identify the unifying influence of groupwork, finding it to be "...a potentially integrating experience because it connects the universal experience of being human...[It] can also provide a more effective environment to experience empowerment because they can be used to replicate or simulate the larger society; in many respects they are microcosms of the wider society" (2000:13).

The value of groupwork is therefore well understood within the literature and several authors (see Doel and Sawdon 1999 and Otway and Peake 1994) provide useful summaries of the main and accepted benefits of groupwork. These include:

- maintaining the humanity of the participants

- value of reciprocity (sharing, giving and receiving)
- recognition of commonality ('all in the same boat' notion) which breaks down isolation and facilitates sharing
- discovery of the companionship bond that develops when sharing common experiences and feelings
- validation of the participants allowing them to be heard and providing their experiences with credibility
- facilitation of change by providing a safe and effective medium for change – what Shulman refers to as "a laboratory for learning" (1984:6)
- provides a safe environment to rehearse new feelings and behaviours.

In addition the formation of relationships encouraged students to 'attach' to their learning. Given the current massification of higher education this may be especially beneficial in providing an opportunity for students to get to know others. A lot of traditional 'ice-breaking' events appear to rely on a student's ability to self-initiate or self-direct themselves, but there may be many students who feel unable to actively seek out such relationships, and these may be the very students that need the most support from such relationships. Strong and personal relationships may therefore mitigate some of the effects of the impersonal and anonymous mass universities that appear to currently exist. This is supported by Moxley, Najor-Durack and Dumbridge (2001:158) who state that: "Forming strong relationships with students is the bedrock of the helping process."

The above favourable aspects of groupwork all influenced my choice of it as a medium through which to deliver the personal development programme within this research. Furthermore, groupwork not only permits identification and discussion of difficult or problem areas, it is also provides the opportunity to celebrate the abilities and strengths of individuals within the group. Doel *et al* (1999:15) concur with this, suggesting that: "A group which helps participants discover and celebrate their strengths is an exceptionally empowering experience". The use of groupwork within this research also allows the group to develop communal solutions, where students

were allowed to discover and challenge each other – each bringing something different to the group.

The aims of my personal development groups were one of the first considerations of the groups. These were established via joint discussions as increasing levels of self-awareness, developing the personal, emotional and social skills necessary to maximise one's higher learning potential and improving one's learning experience. The personal development groups were therefore established with a clear emotional focus. This feelings focus is crucial in terms of effecting meaningful self development. Smith (1987: 100 in Sunderland) suggests that: "The maximum gain on the self-benefit criterion was found when the principal learning group in the workshop focused on sharing feelings arising from life and past experiences." Group work therefore appeared to be a beneficial forum within which to undertake the personal development work not least of which because it is consistent with the feelings focus of the programme itself.

After deciding to undertake the development work within small groups there are several other practical considerations which had to be decided, the first of which is timing. I met each of the 2 groups for 1 hour each week, at a regular time, in the same quiet and private room for a period of 12 consecutive weeks. Prior to the commencement of the first session with each group I discussed the issue of confidentiality with both groups. Each group subsequently undertook a verbal confidentiality agreement such that issues discussed within the group would not be discussed with any other persons outside of the group. I felt that this was necessary to protect the privacy of each group member and also in terms of building a bond of mutual trust between individuals in order to enhance the depth of self-disclosure in subsequent sessions. An integral part of this confidentiality agreement was a shared understanding that each member of the group would extend a level of mutual respect and tolerance for others within the group.

Each weekly group session was conducted on a first-name basis only and I began each session with an open invitation for students to share any learning experiences or issues arising from the previous week with the other students in the group. This placed the focus of the discussion immediately with the students and allowed them

sufficient freedom to direct the course of the current week's discussion. Issues arising from these shared experiences were then discussed in an open way amongst the members of the group.

I closed each session by moving around the group and allowing each person an opportunity to share their reflections and feelings on the session. This was a useful way of assisting students to undertake active self-reflection, and also supported the inclusive nature of the group by providing each member with an equal opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings with the group.

After the close of each session there were always opportunities for individual students to discuss further any issues of concern, or those that fell outside of the scope of the personal development sessions, in confidence. These issues could be raised either with myself as a student counsellor or with members of the university's resident student counselling service, depending on the student's preference.

In addition, **after** each session I made hand-written notes of my reflective thoughts and feelings before, during and after each session as appropriate. These notes were not taken during the sessions to avoid giving the impression that I was somehow in control or an authority figure, and to prevent students from perceiving me as making written judgements or assessments of them as they talked. Additionally not having to write during the sessions allowed me to be fully present (actively listening and contributing) within each session and not distracted by taking notes. All my note-taking was done immediately after each session. Over time these built into a comprehensive research journal containing a rich source of self-data, the use of which are discussed later in this chapter.

A second practical consideration was that of the seating arrangements of the group. Seating is an important early consideration in terms of creating the optimum ambience and outlook within any group. Bligh (1986) suggests some pointers for healthy groups, including the common-sense observation that people will not talk to people that they cannot see. Therefore, to facilitate the maximum amount of discussion everyone within the personal development groups should be able to see everyone else. The obvious solution to this requirement is that the chairs need to be arranged in a

circular pattern. Moreover, Bligh *op cit* suggests that the physical distance between the chairs should be equal, because they are symbolic of the social distance between the individuals. As such, within my personal development groups the chairs were evenly spaced within a circular arrangement.

Furthermore, my chair (as the facilitator of the group) was the same design, colour and size as all the other chairs. This seems like a minor point but it is important if the group is to view the tutor as an equal within the group. Using a different chair – bigger, softer, more comfortable, or whatever would immediately set me aside as somehow 'different' or 'special' within the group. Standardising the type of chairs used for all participants reinforces the equality amongst the members through parity of treatment. My chair was also spaced within the circle in the same fashion as all the other available seats. This is also important if the tutor is to be viewed as an equal member of the group. The circular configuration lends itself ideally to placing the tutor as an equal participant within the group because, within the circle, no one member is immediately identified as the leader. These spatial considerations are important in terms of creating the right atmosphere for the group.

Each group session was therefore conducted with students and myself sitting in a circle, with no tables, no notes, no pens or other resources being used. This prevented the existence of any physical barriers between individuals and removed any physical distractions (such as mobile telephones) so that each member of the group could focus completely on sharing experiences, listening and talking through issues. Sitting in a circle also prevented the creation of any hierarchical structure within the group i.e. the teacher standing at the front of the class and students arranged in rows facing the front. As such each person had equal physical status within the circle and any obvious role taking (e.g. tutor as authoritarian leader), or power imbalances were avoided. This helped to create a shared space within which each individual was equal. Sitting in a circle also allows each person to see the face of all the other participants. This gives participants access to the facial expressions of others, which are central to understanding the feelings of those others. It also promotes a good degree of eye contact, which is critical for developing trust and understanding relationships between the students. This was especially important when sessions became quite emotionally charged, which frequently occurred. Robust levels of

group support developed amongst the group members particularly as difficult or painful experiences were shared. At times it was almost tangible to see the breakdown of feelings of isolation as students discovered that others in the group felt exactly as they did, were having the same difficult experiences and were struggling with very similar feelings. During these times strong bonds built on the sharing of common experiences were developed and students appeared to feel both understood and supported by the group.

Mowatt and Siann describe these particular benefits of providing such support in a group setting. "The most endorsed sources of learning were feedback from others, learning that one's problems were not unique, receiving advice or suggestions, understanding areas of oneself previously unknown and feeling positively about the cohesion of the group" (1998:100). Brookfield also supports the benefit of using groups that share experiences for personal development work, holding that "...peers and fellow learners provide information, serve as skill models, and act as reinforcers of learning and as counsellors in times of crisis" (1986:44).

My decision to use a circular arrangement is a well used and understood technique and is a recognised and popular educational method in both North America and Europe for promoting confidence, self-understanding and self-esteem amongst schoolchildren. It is also an established mechanism within group psychotherapy sessions. Its benefits, however, are not restricted to this sector and it is accepted that circle time has a general value in helping individuals to:

> "...learn to talk about their feelings, to gain a sense of belonging...and to develop qualities such as trust, responsibility, empathy, co-operation, caring behaviour and respect for the feelings of others and to engage in personal reflection..." (Halstead and Taylor, 2000: 185-6).

Mowatt *et al* concur with these findings and also suggest that "...circular seating helps to promote free discussion and reduce hierarchy." (1998:95)

Aside from these, there are further advantages to undertaking the development work within a circular structure. Research by Klein (1956) demonstrates that groups organised in a circle as opposed to a linear or other formations, are much better at

learning to cope with uncertainty. This is important for the personal development work being undertaken within this research since it is focusing specifically on improving higher learning. Learning, especially higher learning contains a good degree of uncertainty, since its nature is not concerned with right and wrong answers, but the discussion of a myriad of perspectives and possibilities between these extremes. In addition Abercombie (1986 in Bligh), suggests that the changes made in response to certain designed group structures are not transient, but carry over into behaviour outside the group. Again this has important implications for the self-development work, since it strictly occurs within the small-group sessions rather than within the classroom environment. Rogers and Freiberg (1983: 313) concur and describe how the participants in a co-operative learning group can benefit from the:

> "...powerful social and academic results in terms of developing positive interdependence with each other, face-to-face interaction, individual as well as group learning plus interpersonal and small group skills – all of which are valuable transferable skills."

As such, it appears accepted within the literature that self-development gains within the group are transferable to the learning situations that students face. This is an important consensus for my research, since all of the self-development work undertaken with the students is designed to transfer or support their transition into higher learning and their retention within it.

The use of groups within the personal development programme addresses another key issue within higher learning. Learning within universities is clearly a social activity - it takes place in classes of students, which are currently increasing in size. Such classroom-based learning is a social educational experience. Hence students do need some level of social ability in order to maximise the benefit of learning within social groupings. The ability to work in groups is therefore beneficial from both a personal development perspective - Dart suggests that: "Sharing learning experiences with peers can assist this [personal] development..." (1998:41)- and also from a higher learning perspective - The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education includes "...the ability to work in groups" (2000: 4, 4.1 (viii)) as an important higher learning ability.

The personal development programme used within my research, recognises this social dimension to structured higher learning and addresses its needs through the use of groups. Bion (1961) demonstrates that one of the key features of groups is that it improves one's understanding of the nature of social interactions between people. He suggests that group processes are a model for what goes on beneath the surface in real life. As such the personal development group exposes students to the genuine experience of social learning. This affords them the opportunity to observe, discuss, experience, question, rehearse and understand how such social situations work for them. Such exposure raises self-understanding and enables students to improve their response, behaviour, role, or participation within such social learning environments. Furthermore, the personal development group is largely leaderless, in that as a tutor I facilitate rather than lead the group. Bion *op cit* suggests that leaderless groups enhance the group's social skills since it forces the group to also come to terms with any conflicts they may have over the authority-dependency relationship. This has obvious implications for teaching at all levels, but especially at the higher level where students are expected to be autonomous in the learning approach, yet often struggle with their own desire for the tutor to direct, lead and assume control of their learning. This fundamental student conflict is at the heart of the passive, reliant student's learning behaviour and conception, and may serve as a significant impediment to academic success.

Groups also have a tendency to develop their own energy and forces within them which set the tone of the level of activity generated within them and often provide the impetus for change. This phenomenon is referred to as 'group dynamics'. The forces within groups are complex and a composite product of many items including; the personalities of the participants, the topics being discussed, the energies and enthusiasm of the facilitator; the atmosphere and ambience within the group and the philosophy and ethos of the group. However, despite the complex nature of small groups it is vital that those whose aim is to facilitate self-development need to quickly develop a foundation of trust amongst participants where group responsibilities are shared and with all members acting in a natural way. This enables the group to develop a cohesive structure, where participants are committed to the group and to sharing experiences within that group. This is important because it is not possible to force individuals to self-develop – it has to be a consensual experience. The sharing

of experiences may itself facilitate a deep bonding, which commonly leads to long and successful relationships being developed.

Cahn suggests that "...trust is to a group what...temperature is to a state of health." 1986:103. Trust within a group provides a degree of assurance that the other people in the group will not let them down. If trust is absent it can prevent members from being open and honest since members may become defensive and protective of themselves as a form of protection against the threat of the trustless group. As such, trust is an intrinsic element of a productive group providing it with high levels of participation, free-flowing discussion, open behaviour, and a high degree of spontaneous sharing. Group trust is not a spontaneous commodity, but develops over time and Cahn *op cit* holds that: "...trust comes about when there is an absence of fear, of punitiveness, of the need to be defensive. It develops...[through]...mutual inquiry, exploration, spontaneity, candour, honesty, interdependence and play...In such a state, one is ready to learn because there is a readiness to expose oneself to the benefits of learning." The literature therefore finds that for groups to effectively operate at such a personal level, it is important to establish trust amongst the participants. This has obvious implications for developing group trust within my personal development groups especially since their focus was on the expression of personal feelings.

The literature also demonstrates that group facilitators play an essential role in establishing group trust. I utilised Rogers' (1961) model of facilitator behaviour, which was developed from his model of therapy and suggests that the facilitators of learning groups should:

- use authentic behaviour that is role-free
- offer unconditional acceptance to all members of the group
- be empathic and use self-disclosure.

Using these person-centred principles enabled me to seek to build trust into the group. Cahn (in Bligh1986) also recognises the effect of person-centred techniques on engendering trust into the development group and states that: "Perhaps the clearest

measure of trust comes from the interpersonal phenomenon of self-disclosure. The process of letting another person know what you 'think, feel or want'." Self-disclosure therefore allows access to the inner world of another person and within the development groups of this research it began with my example. This is important since there is a mutuality to self-disclosure – it is not a one-way discourse. Greene (1964) is clear that developmental discussion without self-disclosure is emotionally neutral and is essentially evasive. When an individual self-discloses (i.e. shares significant or meaningful personal experiences and feelings with others) it reveals their vulnerabilities, fallibilities and limitations – the essence of their humanity. Such revelation allows other students within the group (as well as the individual concerned) to see that person in an honest light, as a fallible, 'real', human individual, which increases their empathic understanding of the other and engenders trust within the group relationship. Too often we are instructed, advised or coerced into hiding our true feelings about issues – e.g. 'putting on a brave face', 'presenting a professional front', 'keeping a stiff-upper-lip' – and all of these things may have their place. However, such concealment has no place within a self-development group, since what needs to be understood is the 'real' or genuine person and their responses. Self-disclosure is also a powerfully liberating experience. The recognition that one can say what one is truly feeling without fear of reprisal or rejections is a cathartic revelation to many. It is only through such authentic experiences that it is possible to truly understand who we are and where our shortcomings lie. This recognition opens the door to self-development and the path to maximising learning potential is cleared.

As such I felt it unrealistic and somewhat unfair to expect students to share personal experiences if I, as the facilitator, was unprepared to do the same. It is therefore a case of 'leading' or more accurately facilitating by example and my self-disclosure was an important stage in creating authentic and real sharing of personal experiences in order to allow students sufficient personal insight that catalyses self-awareness.

Despite, its significant benefits, the act of self-disclosure is not an easy state to achieve. Jourard (1964) suggests that the fear of self-disclosure drives many people to be unknown even to themselves. Self-disclosure in everyday life exposes an individual to the judgement of others, and adverse judgements such as rejection, ridicule or blame sometimes make self-disclosure a strategy that is too risky for an

individual to take. Such barriers isolate and 'trap' a person, rendering them incapable of making any significant personal change or development in their lives and their learning. Non-disclosing behaviour therefore has some heavy costs, including some that encroach upon one's ability to maximise learning potential. For example, a student that suffers with low self-esteem or a lack of self-confidence may be reluctant to ask questions in tutorials, participate in classroom discussions or admit that they have not understood an issue. Such reticent or withdrawn behaviour prevents that student from fully engaging with their learning and presents a self-limiting learning obstruction for that individual. Effective learning therefore, necessitates a degree of self-disclosure which itself is reliant on a students level of personal development. Students have to be prepared to disclose if they have not understood an issue; they have to respond to questions, often revealing the limitations of their knowledge and expertise. Learning involves such personal exposure, students have to be able to take the risks of such exposure if they are to reach their learning potential.

This notion of risk exposure also arises in the sociological literature reviewed earlier in Chapter 3 where Reay *et al* 2001 raise the issue of the perceived risks in higher learning amongst non-traditional students. This literature suggests the perception of a lack of congruence between the habitus of non-traditional students and the higher education institution's habitus can result in a sense of vulnerability and lack of belonging. This translates into feelings of risk amongst students which limit their learning choices in a way that may interfere with their active engagement with higher education. Cahn (1986) illustrates the impact of perceived risk on learning behaviour: "One of the costs in classrooms is that students do not disclose what they know or do not know. Another cost is the continuously defensive climate which makes disclosure a high risk matter which only fools or unrealistic idealists will undertake". Many students may 'choose' to become closed in their learning approach, unprepared, unwilling, or unable to take an active part in their learning in order to mitigate their risk exposure, which in turn may restrict their ability to engage in deeper learning experiences. They are therefore (because of their current level of personal development) approaching learning with a low level of conception, treating it as a superficial experience that may only manage to create a learning experience akin to knowledge transfer.

Using my understanding of the impact of risk for non-traditional students, I strove to provide a respectful, accepting ambience within the groups by engaging in open discussions and providing a low-risk climate where differences of opinion were readily discussed. The impact of this approach are discussed in the results section in Chapter 7.

I have discussed above how the literature influenced the decision to undertake the development work in groups. Groups by their very nature are a social structure where individuals come together to share a common purpose and as such involve some degree of consensus. Recognising this I felt it important that there was an early and clear discussion of the 'rules' of the group. Within my personal development programme the first meeting of the groups were used to discuss the aims and rationale of the programme and to initiate discussions of some key issues including self and mutual respect, the use of non-judgemental attitudes and agreeing confidentiality.

As part of these opening discussions students considered the difference between 'out there and in here', joiners and leavers (whether 'new' students should be allowed to join the group once it was established and whether existing members should be permitted to leave before completion of the programme). Here, the group decided that no-one would be permitted to join the established groups but that existing members should be free to leave at any time to preserve their ultimate control over the experience. At the heart of joining and leaving is the sense of belonging to the group, which is a private and personal experience that begins at week 1. The group decided that new members joining part way through would feel like intruders or outsiders and would not have the complete experience and therefore never be an equal participant in the process. The totality of experience is encapsulated in what Bodinham and Weinstein refer to as the 'group memory'. This is only truly shared and owned by persons who have been present for the whole event. The required levels of trust, disclosure and intimacy best lend itself to a closed group and as such my personal development groups elected to become closed groups. It was also decided that the groups should be leaderless and that all participants should be free to speak openly and candidly, and that each person would treat all other members with respect but remain able to disagree and challenge others at any time.

A further aspect of promoting student control within the groups is the decision by the group to make attendance at the sessions optional. This avoided any element of compulsion which it was felt would run contrary to the empowering aspect of allowing students to take control of their situation. By making them attend seemed wholly at odds with the whole ethos of trying to pass control of the group to them. I took a chance on the optional attendance mode. This was a successful strategy in that over the 10 weeks only 2 participants missed one session in each case, and on both instances there were very genuine reasons – child's illness, and a family bereavement – which precluded their attendance. Such reasons were fully understood and accepted by the group and as such the missed attendance did not cause any friction or loss of group memory within the groups.

It was important for the group to set its own goals and define its own purposes. This concentrated the power and control of the group with the participants at the earliest opportunity. Such personal control is not only important for establishing the practical regulation of the sessions but is also crucial to the personal development focus of the groups i.e. fostering control and responsibility amongst the students. Developing such optimal attitudinal orientations within the group is also an important precursor of self-disclosure. Again, through my explanation and example I sought to encourage students to use non-judgemental attitudes towards each other. It is important not to confuse a non-judgemental attitude with one that merely passively agrees and accepts everything that another is saying. The latter is unhelpful in terms of personal development, since it simply constructs an agreeable façade that is neither open nor honest to the other. Breton (1991:45) cautions that "...support without challenge does not lead to learning and does not lead to empowerment." One of the functions of the development groups within my research *is* to challenge the attitude and responses of others. It is the way the challenge is made that needs to be non-judgemental. This allows the group to actively experience disagreements and confrontation, which again are intrinsic elements of higher learning and therefore reflects what occurs in the 'normal' classroom based learning scenario. Abercrombie (1986, in Bligh) supports the beneficial effect of confrontation and challenge, suggesting that: "The differences of opinion in the group and the interpretations made...in a supportive climate, help to liberate the participants from too restricted a personal psychological framework." It is often through such challenge that personal development work is most readily

achieved. Challenging and confronting students within the groups is therefore an appropriate personal development strategy.

Group members therefore facilitate the personal growth of each other by offering positive support and acceptance, and by challenging and confronting each other. Small groups can therefore assist in breaking down isolation, offering peer support; enhancing self-esteem and providing a participative and co-operative environment. This provides students with an open emotional as well as physical space within which to undertake the development work.

Undertaking the personal development work within a small group setting also acknowledges each student's individuality and 'uniqueness'. This is significant because a student's previous social and educational history will also impact upon their way of being (habitus) within a small group. For example, if they come from a family where open discussion is the norm, and they have been encouraged to express themselves and their feelings, and have studied in an active environment, then they will have been enabled (by acquiring cultural capital) in making the transition into higher learning. However, if students come "...from families where reasonable discussion is not frequently carried on, they may even have had little meaningful verbal contact with their families in years, and school may have been predominantly a place for taking down notes and learning as much as possible by heart. Several years of this deadening process will have depressed their intellectual enthusiasm, discouraged them from thinking, and left them with a feeling of distrust towards teachers." (Flood Page, in Bligh 1986:69). This social conditioning argument is analogous with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital. It is unsurprising that, if exposed to such an environment, students will have learned some inappropriate learning habits, which will be displayed through their 'habitus'. Flood Page (1986:70) suggests that changing such habits and attitudes is a difficult task but "...is one for which the small group is the best mechanism we have."

Furthermore, despite each of the group participants being unique and different individuals they are all bound by the common experience of being at university for the first time, enrolled on the same course, having contact with the same tutors in the same environment. Initially, this area of commonality is restricted to their higher

education experience, which is beneficial since the personal development work that takes place within the group sessions is primarily focused on developing students to become better higher learners.

The decision to use small groupwork rather than working with individual students within my research, also had a number of practical dimensions to it. Firstly it enabled me to work with more students than I would have been able to using a one-to-one basis. Secondly I had to balance my desire to work with as many students as possible with the amount of time I had available to undertake the development work with them. The group sessions which operated within a set timescale – 1-hour sessions for 12 weeks initially allowed me access to a greater number of students within the limited amount of time available. Such time constraint did, however, galvanise attention and activity and guarded against too much content drift within each session. The alternative would have been to allow the group sessions to be open-ended in relation to time. This obviously has practical difficulties in terms of timetabling the possible extended sessions – frequently another class would be scheduled within the room in the subsequent hour. Also research by Doel *et al* (1999:57) suggests that one of the major advantages of the time-limited group is that it "focuses primarily on the individuals in the group, [whereas] the open-ended one develops a life of its own."

Thirdly, the length of the programme, i.e. a 12-week block, was selected to run alongside the teaching and learning experience, which also took place in the same 12-week period. In a survey of groupwork, the once-a week session is near universal (Caddick 1991 and Schonfeld and Morrissey 1992). The selection of the once a week approach for this research was based on discussions with students within the group and the fact that personal development work based on learning experiences has to firstly allow the experiences to occur and provide the opportunity for students to reflect over time on those experiences. It seemed optimal to hold the development sessions each week because this allowed students to be exposed to the full range of learning (in terms of subjects, formats, and tutors) and provided a short period of time to reflect on those without allowing too long a time when issues may become forgotten or suppressed.

Lastly, the size of the group was largely determined by its experiential nature. Much of the groupwork literature recommends a group size of between 5 and 12 participants. The personal development groups used within this research had 5 and 6 participants respectively. This gave sufficient depth of time to each participant and kept the group small enough to promote intimacy and depth of disclosure and remained small enough for a single facilitator to manage. Smaller groups offer a further benefit in that it makes it more difficult for students who have a tendency to be passive to remain so within the sessions. Since student passivity is one of the main impediments to higher learning I considered that two smaller groups would be preferable (in terms of countering student passivity) to one large group with 11 participants. Mowatt *et al* (1998: 94) offer a synopsis of some of the key research findings on the pedagogic advantages of small groups as:

"...aids the movement away from student passivity to students actively structuring their own learning (Rogers 1969);...stimulates and accelerates cognitive growth (Gruenfield and Hollingshead, 1993);...enhances social and communicative skills (Cassels, 1990)...enhances creativity (Hare, 1982); and, finally...utilises scarce teaching resources effectively" (Griffiths, 1994).

As such I considered the use of small groups to be both appropriate and beneficial in terms of supporting the personal development work that I wanted to undertake with the student participants.

(ii) Self as researcher, and the use of self-reflective data

Within this section I would firstly like to consider my role within the group, which I see as having several facets. To begin, my over-riding and principal role was to facilitate the sessions. The first aspect of this to consider is the psychosocial stance that I used. This was driven by the person-centred approach and I sought to adopt the 'core conditions' of the Rogerian approach in my interactions with the students. As such I was continuously striving to create the right kind of supportive climate which often involved being myself! This sounds very simplistic, but it is actually quite difficult to achieve. The approach requires that all defences, barriers and professional fronts have to come down and that the focus is placed on communicating openly and

honestly with the others and presenting an open way of being where my experiences and feelings were shared. This approach aims to set an example of the developmental 'way of being', establishing the tone within the sessions that enables positive and enabling relationships between group members (including myself) to develop.

This is an ideal type of social role, which in practice – and outside of a therapeutic context – presented some personal challenges to me. My role within the department was not at the time of the research simply restricted to being a personal development facilitator and also included my primary role as a full-time senior lecturer within the department. There are problematic dimensions and tensions inherent in attempting such a stance in a non-therapeutic context and within a multiplicity of roles, where there are implicit and explicit power relations. These difficulties are specifically discussed later in my research within the results section of Chapter 7. At this point, and notwithstanding these difficulties, I remained committed to being an equal participant in the process. To this end I strove (through self-disclosure and congruence) to be present as a whole person maintaining my essential humanity and rejecting, where possible, any expert and professional façade as a university lecturer within the institution, thereby attempting to be a real and genuine role model for the students (a process described by Rogers as 'authentic being') encouraging them to become more open and honest themselves and catalyse a deeper level of development.

Doel *et al* offer some further guidance on achieving effective facilitation in terms of 'tuning into the group', which they suggest involves "matching the mood...something very much like finding the right frequency on a radio. It is your attempt as a group worker to put yourself in the shoes of the group participants" (1999:113). This is what Rogers described as 'empathic understanding' which comes from truly listening to and hearing what the other person is saying and reflecting that meaning back to them to check your understanding of what is being said, or not said.

Schulman (1984:22) also suggests that focusing on feelings not thoughts and using a non-judgemental approach are vital to achieving this 'tuning in'. These findings agree with the earlier findings of Rogers whose primary focus was also on the affective rather than intellectual aspects, who is also clear of the need to suspend

one's individual value system so as to not judge the others within a group, and thereby avoid group tensions.

As the facilitator I responded to students as they shared their experiences and feelings in a non-judgemental way – where my personal value judgements were suspended - that offered unconditional positive regard. This is a way of 'prizing' students, of making them feel valued, by accepting their feelings and opinions as valuable contributions and enabling the student to accept that they have a value in their own right. This is especially important within the educational setting since much of university life is built on negative criticism. Assessment and evaluation all too sharply indicate where students are lacking, or have gone wrong, made a mistake or failed to understand. These can erode a student's sense of self worth and there needs to be a balance maintained within such a critical arena. With this balance in mind it is worth recognising that UPR is not about making students feel that they are something they are not, or artificially contriving to inflate their sense of self. It is about them having a realistic and balanced view of who they are and what they can achieve. If students are more aware of their own limitations it allows them not only to derive ways of expanding the boundaries of their limitations, but also to be realistic about what they can achieve. This non-judgemental arena also provided a psychologically safe climate, borne of mutual trust and respect, a caring, warm and accepting space, which is judgement-free. This is very important, especially in the competitively charged world of higher education, where students can feel constantly judged on every comment, every question, and every wrong response.

Doel *et al* 1999:157 also discuss the importance of tension within a group: "Just as the tension with which the wool is held affects the quality of knitting, so a group requires the right degree of 'tension' for effective groupwork. Too slack and it is under-stimulating and benign, too taut and it is over-challenging and unsafe. The art of the group worker, like that of the knitter is to feel for the right tension." Clearly experience and training play a vital part in the facilitator's ability to develop and maintain the correct tension within the group. In addition to tension, effective facilitation also involves gauging the correct amount of structure. Too much structure leads to a dominant, autocratic leader who does not allow the participants enough

emotional room to develop. Too little and the session can descend into chaos which is not an atmosphere conducive to effective personal development.

I used this understanding to inform my approach to group facilitation, where I used empathic listening and a non-judgemental orientation within a broad, but no predefined structure, the latter providing flexibility within the sessions for students to develop their own structure within the existing framework. To maintain the correct tension and focus within the groups I used a variety of interactional techniques. These included providing a beginning to each of the sessions, responding to feelings, giving and receiving information, reinforcing and summarising, providing feedback, support and encouragement, challenging and confronting and providing an appropriate ending to each of the sessions.

Amongst the most important of the practical aspects of my facilitative role was that of steering the groups' developmental efforts into a channel that was focused on supporting their higher learning experiences. Bertcher (1994:90) describes the focusing role as, "...calling the group's attention to something that has been said or that has happened to highlight or clarify it so that the group will be more aware of what has occurred, or to bring the discussion back to the agreed-upon business of the group". These steering techniques are important within my research since my groups were given a lot of freedom in terms of the topics discussed so it was important for me to focus discussions so that we did not stray too far from our agreed remit.

Focusing the groups attention in this way is a form of gate keeping which Bertcher defines as, "... behaviour that helps all members of the group participate more or less equally by limiting those members who monopolise the discussion and by encouraging low participators to talk more" (1994:114).

Gate keeping is therefore about promoting broader participation and stimulating reluctant students to engage in discussions. My approach to gate keeping was subtle to avoid it being interpreted as an attempt to 'shut someone else up' or 'force someone to talk'. To me, it was not about closing the gate on another but drawing the reluctant participant into the discussion. It is crucial to encourage such participants to develop their confidence within the group – e.g. I used paired discussions with

feedback to provide reluctant participants with an opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings.

The second aspect of my facilitative role involves the practical management of the sessions in relation to the power distribution within the groups. Beaty (1999:145) describes this active process as: "Facilitation implies that the activity is one of support rather than initiating. The experience belongs to the student and the facilitator helps the student to get most out of the experience by providing appropriate resources and intervening in support of the learning."

Effective facilitation is therefore not concerned with seizing power within the group, directing discussion and taking control. The focus of the discussions lies with the students' needs. Brookfield (1986:9) suggests that effective facilitation uses voluntary participation which utilises "...respect among participants for each others self-worth" within an iterative cycle of activity, reflection and collaborative analysis which nurtures self-directed empowered learners.

I used these guiding principles within my sessions to strengthen my practical facilitation skills. Participation was indeed voluntary - the research used a self-selected sample of willing participants. The person-centred ethos of the sessions focused on critical and cyclical patterns of reflection and on empowering students. I avoided taking the leadership role within the group, instead encouraging collaborative ownership of the sessions, where each individual is as worthy as the next. One of the key elements of successful facilitation is this collaborative or sharing of the control of the development work. This is also consistent with the person-centred approach and its success is closely allied to my ability as the facilitator to share the power amongst the group members.

As such in addition to striving for authentic being, I also endeavoured to dissipate any power imbalance between the students and myself. This is not easy since students seem automatically to adopt a deferent and submissive position in relation to their tutors. However, effective personal development requires an even balance of power between participants and facilitator. This is essential since one of the main aims of development work is to encourage the students to gain control over and responsibility for their studies. This is impeded or even prevented if students are overshadowed by

a powerful authority figure within the group. Students have to be 'allowed' – i.e. given permission – to take developmental control and an authoritarian tutor can extinguish any thought of self-reliant learning within the student and often is a contributory cause of submissive, passive and dependent student behaviours. Gibbs (1981:98) supports this view: "A consequence of the 'non-expert' role adopted is that the person running the exercise can develop quite a different sort of relationship with students than is customary, in which both parties are jointly trying to understand what is going on in particular learning activities. This helps to transfer responsibility to students for the progress they make."

During the early sessions with the groups I was explicit with the students about my role and responsibility within the group (i.e. I shared my vision, the need and purposes of the group) as a first stage in the negotiations of what the group subsequently agreed to be its collective aims.

From a personal perspective, within the groups, I felt comfortable that the students were able to relate to me as an individual despite the fact that at other times they saw me in another role – i.e. as that of university lecturer or course tutor. Indeed in some ways this may have increased the students' identification with me as a support figure. This is borne out by the research of Yorke (2002: 37) in the area of non-completion who states that "...members of the academic staff were most often approached by students for advice and support". Others including Moxley *et al* continue by suggesting that: "Members of staff who expand their roles into tutorials, independent studies and small group projects can be a pivotal strategy of the institutional retention mission" (2001:55). Within my research the importance of the need for tutors to be actively involved in the learning partnership with students is recognised. As such the programme was devised and managed by myself and as such I occupied a dual role of programme facilitator and tutor. This allowed me to work towards developing strong, open and enduring relationships with students – the sort of relationships that writers suggest are central to students engaging with higher learning.

Cotton (1995:98) too agrees that the role of the tutor often extends into the arena of student support as an intrinsic component of learning: "To help learners to learn sometimes teachers often have to act as counsellors." Therefore, I felt it both

reasonable and appropriate for myself - as a member of academic staff – to also be the facilitator of the personal development course. As such, and in line with the literature, I was also committed to blending into the group, in terms of standing amongst the other members rather than standing apart from them and I took my part in sharing my experiences with the others. This was important in terms of cultivating parity of status between me and the others within the group.

Lastly, my role also included supporting students by raising their awareness of any resources within the institution where appropriate. Rather than being directive this is merely the act of sharing useful information with another that they can then choose to act upon or otherwise as a complement to their development of personal 'solutions'.

After describing my role within the programme in the section above, it becomes clear that at times it was arguably specialist and there are obvious training and development implications for persons who undertake such development activities with students. It is important to realise that there are "...strong social forces operating in small groups" Mowatt *et al* (1998:99). These range from the apprehension of being judged by the others in the group, the need to be accepted and fit into the group and an unwillingness to speak out against the accepted view within the group. Facilitating such a group can be an emotional, challenging, fraught, confusing and difficult task to undertake. Individuals can become vulnerable, exposed and upset and some degree of training is necessary to prevent any potential emotional and personal 'damage' being caused to the facilitator and more importantly the participants. Rogers (1994) notes that tutors need a variety of skills and training in order to effectively facilitate personal development within group settings. Firstly, they need to develop a strong sense of social sensitivity. This enables the tutor to be aware of a variety of communications both verbal and non-verbal, but also to be aware of more subtle patterns of communication. These include group tensions (e.g. nervous laughter, tense silences); individual emotional tone (e.g. sitting on the edge of one's chair, or adopting a closed body position); group interpersonal competition (e.g. approval seeking behaviour – always agreeing with the position another puts forwards). Such sensitivity is essential in order to facilitate easy communication within the learning. Klein (1970) supports Rogers' view and suggests that trainers need a variety of skills

to undertake personal development work with others including; understanding the relevant theory, ability to apply the theory in practice and some training it its use.

As a trained, experienced and qualified person-centred counsellor and at the time of the research, a current student counsellor within my department who was supported by appropriate counsellor-supervision I felt adequately trained and supported to undertake the role with the required levels of skill and competence.

Within the research my personal reflections (as a participant and facilitator within the research) on the personal development programme were collected in a detailed journal and subsequently used as a source of data. As such this raft of self-reflective data was integrated and included as part of the process of knowledge production. The importance of the use of the self as a source of data is well recognised:

> "The subjectivities of the researcher *and* of those being studied are part of the research process. Researchers' reflections on their actions and observations in the field, their impressions, irritations, feelings and so on, become valuable data in their own right..." (Flick 2002: 6)

The Austrian philosopher, Husserl (1859-1938) constructed an approach to enquiry that was grounded in self-reflection – termed 'egological' – and did much to promote its use as an acceptable approach to inquiry. West (1998) too explores the use of the researcher's involvement in the research as a source of data as a way of making sense of the research. This is embodied in the Human Inquiry Approach whose cyclical nature involves an iterative process of experiencing reflecting and refining knowledge. Its key exponent is Reason (1994) who argues for critical subjectivity, i.e. an acceptance of a researcher's involvement that is "critical, self-aware, discriminating and informed" (1994: 11). In addition the use of critical self-reflection is an integral part of the person-centred approach to counselling, where the therapist engages in regular and ongoing critical reflexivity as an important aspect of understanding and monitoring self-perceptions. As such the use of self-data in my research is both supported by and consistent with the person-centred framework.

(iii) Using silence as a tool of personal development

Prioritising the sharing of feelings and personal reflection are used within my research as key drivers of personal development processes. Both of these phenomena may involve using silence within the small groups. Griffiths (1999:105) suggests that developing the skill of practising silence is one through which "remarkable insights can be gained."

Silence is a powerful tool on both sides of the personal development relationship – i.e. for those who are struggling to articulate their feelings within it and for those who are listening to it. Griffiths suggests that: "Listening in silence...is an active process, engaging and heightening awareness and observation" (1999:105). This makes the other feel heard at a deep level – connected in some way to the listener. It is not just about listening in silence though – it is also about using group silences to accentuate the reflective process through which self-awareness is developed. The effective use of silence is a well-used and powerful counselling tool.

The persistent silence of a participant can be problematic within a group, since – at the extreme - if all participants adopted a silent stance, no discussion would take place at all! Silence in everyday life can feel threatening, hostile, tense, aggressive, unsettling and frustrating, but on the other hand it can also be comforting, safe, relaxing, defensive and familiar. Within the group scenario it takes on another dimension, "...whereas silence in a one-to-one encounter can serve to emphasise the intimacy and closeness of the encounter, silence in the group as a whole can feel very public and expose the loneliness of individuals" Doel *et al* (1999:222). Batsleer also acknowledges that silence does not always have a benign character: "Silence is often related to the operation of power and is a sign of the existence of conflict" (1994:198).

Because the causes and meanings of silence are so diverse and subjective, most of us will struggle when deciding what is being communicated within an unfamiliar silence. Possibilities for a silent response from a group participant could be boredom, self-protection, a lack of willingness or ability to get involved, a hostile distancing, a warm empathic agreement, or a deep reflection on what is being said. Non-verbal signals may provide some clues, e.g. a defensive body position – arms folded across

the body, no eye-contact, leaning backwards in the seat, turned slightly away from the next nearest person – could indicate that the person is feeling defensive and trying to withdraw or detach themselves from what is being said. However, non-verbal signals themselves can be confused and indistinct and reflect a complex array of thoughts and feelings that an individual is experiencing.

In addition, it is important to consider that the silence of individuals within groups may reflect the "...links between the dynamics in the small group and wider, societal forces outside the group" (Doel *et al* 1999:222) where "the institutional location of groupwork determines or shapes whose voices are privileged and whose speech marginalized" (Batsleer 1994: 203). Many students are not accustomed to being listened to and therefore draw the conclusion that what they have to say is not valued, leading them to believe that they do not have a voice in society.

As previously mentioned, psychotherapy and silence have a long tradition. Long silences are often tolerated and used as an important element within the therapeutic process – therapists often being trained NEVER to be the person who breaks the silence. However long silences do have the potential to become very oppressive and to stifle a more fluid and easy exchange of views amongst group participants. As such, within the group sessions of this research, whilst I paid attention to the silences that sometimes developed, I attempted to use them productively within the sessions. I did not feel it appropriate to indulge in long and protracted silences that are best confined to intense therapeutic sessions. Instead I diffused silences of this kind by noticing the silence, commenting on it and asking the group members what they think it might mean. This overcame the silences in a direct and honest way, not by just filling the gap with chatter but by recognising their existence, initiating a discussion about them and then moving the group forward. This often provided meaningful insights into how students perceived themselves in relation to their position within the higher learning environment as well as revealing how they felt about themselves in terms of self-esteem, self-confidence, 'fitting-in' and self-worth.

The counselling literature is also mindful that maintaining one's silence is often a powerful signal that a person is not prepared to share experiences and feelings with the group. This can create further problems within the group in terms of fairness or equity. Other members may feel resentful that they are making the effort and risking

themselves by sharing aspects of themselves and their personal feelings. If this act is not reciprocated it can give rise to adverse feelings towards the silent party, especially if this is a pattern of behaviour that is repeated across weeks of groupwork. Interestingly, there is a direct parallel here with what goes on in the classroom. Often students are called upon to participate in class, to share their thoughts, reactions, and opinions with others. This involves a degree of personal risk, since they are publicly stating their view and leaving themselves open to the criticism of other members of the class. Most tutors will comment that it is the same group of students who are normally prepared to participate within the classroom, and there are a persistent core of students – who for whatever reasons – fail to participate in the classroom environment. This often creates a rift between student factions as the participators feel resentful that they share their thoughts and ideas, but this is a one-way experience, with nothing ever coming back from the passive students. This is a further example of how the small group acts as a microcosm of real classroom-based learning experiences. Within the personal development groups, participants found it useful to discuss this phenomenon, which led to greater understanding on both sides and provided the opportunity, resources and support for change.

An alternative to the 'problem' of the persistently silent group participant is 'turn taking' – where each person is mandated to speak, by moving around the group. Whilst this may be a practical solution, and arguably appropriate for information giving sessions, when it comes to personal development work, it is important that the individual is a willing participant. Self-control cannot be encouraged if it is not permitted within the group – which creates a fundamental paradox. Within my research I did not resort to using a 'turn taking' approach, since from my experience it can often be interpreted as a punitive device, which creates a power-imbalance and a loss of trust between the facilitator and the other participants. Instead I frequently extended an open invitation for anyone who wanted to share who hadn't already done so, to do so. I felt it important to encourage not force. What I did seek from silent participants was an explanation of their silence in order that the group better understand the feelings underlying it and to avoid any misinterpretation. This would frequently take the form of some non-challenging and supportive statement such as: "You are very quiet today...." or "I've noticed that you have been quiet through the discussion, why do you feel that is?"

As well as providing an opening opportunity for the quiet student to begin to share their feelings within the group, it also communicates to them that they have been noticed and included in the group. It is also worth noting that a person who is being silent may be doing so in order to preserve some aspect of themselves, and as such it is important that the group respect this position. Doel *et al* (1999) suggest that there is an important distinction between keeping silent (which is intentional) and being silent (which is incidental). The problem arises if individuals persistently use silence as a means of escaping from or withdrawing from discussion. To some extent and linked to the voluntary nature of the development sessions within this research, the groups did not experience too many difficulties with persistently silent students, since each person had already made a conscious decision to 'take-part'.

Summary of the programme

The literature in Chapter 2 demonstrated the possible benefits of using humanistic psychotherapeutic principles to engage students in a process that ultimately allows them to increase their learning confidence and abilities in order to reach their full learning potential.

Moreover, using the person-centred paradigm as a framework for my personal development programme provides a number of key strengths that are particularly relevant to the current higher education situation. Firstly, it makes available a confidential and non-judgemental forum that allows (and more importantly encourages) students to relax and effectively gives them permission to talk. This actively supports students by legitimising their feelings and experiences, and enables them to feel heard and understood as they are, and at a deep level. This feeling of being heard, accepted and understood is a powerful catalyst to developing self-understanding and acceptance. These qualities are the fundamental building blocks of self-confidence and self-esteem and offer the student a pathway to increasing their learning potential by fostering increased confidence and an ability to develop a clearer sense of their academic identity.

Secondly, my programme offers students unconditional respect as individual learners, which affords them the opportunity to stimulate their self-respect and sense of worth. This aims to empower students in a way that allows them to retain (or gain) control and ownership of their learning experiences. Unfortunately, too much of the current higher academic process can strip students of any level of control – this is especially evident in the assessment process.

Thirdly, the programme uses a proactive as opposed to a reactive approach to student retention (using research evidence to identify 'at risk' students which makes more efficient uses of resources) which Moxley *et al, op cit,* suggest is preferable. They also suggest that retention strategies should be personalised to individual student needs. This is a resource-intensive requirement, and clearly it is not possible to provide a specifically tailored programme of support for every single student. However, the programme used within this research does accept and adapt itself to the individual and their needs, by allowing it to be driven by and focused on the needs of the individuals within the group. This inclusion of individualism within the small-group setting avoids any contradiction, because all students have a common bond in that they are all students at the same level of study on the same undergraduate programme. This area of shared experience binds the individual's experiences to a common central core. This is a significant feature since it allows the development work to be personalised, recognising that each student arrives at the gates of higher education from a different background, with different personal, social and family experiences, and from a variety of cultural and economic surroundings. Each will have different expectations and abilities informed and shaped by their sense of self, and their personal experiences. As such it is not possible to offer a standard format for personal development, it is what it is for each individual person. Each person will derive his or her own meaning from any areas that are discussed, explored or shared. What is important within such a framework is to allow the students to take control and direct the areas of exploration and development such that it is relevant, meaningful and pertinent to their specific needs. The development programme within this research takes place within a warm and supportive atmosphere that encourages and crucially permits the involvement of students and allows them to be who they are. Revealing 'the self' – through self-reflection is a vital step in becoming more fully self-aware. It is important within the group to make each person feel included, valued

and of personal importance. The personal development programme is therefore created around a psychosocial model that provides students with an opportunity to safely "...contemplate the appropriateness of higher education for them and help them to get ready for the transition into the role of active student." Moxley *et al* (2001:24)

In addition, the programme adopts a personal approach within the sessions, which advocates the development of personal relationships between students as a self-supporting mechanism. Through this students can uncover and make sense of what it is to be a student and confront and overcome the challenges of higher learning together, as they arise. To this end the programme aims to create a therapeutic synergy between the students, which over time encourages students to more actively seek out, or develop, their own solutions to the difficulties they face. The literature suggests that it is important to recognise the value of helping each student to "...learn the role of the student and to master the expectations and requirements that compose this role through a support system that is relevant to their needs and that helps them to achieve their aspirations." (Moxley *et al* 2001:11). This is also a fundamental step in ensuring effective transition, and in the longer-term retention, within higher education, and as such the development programme is consistent with the current widening access and increasing participation rates agenda.

Lastly my programme integrates support into the curricular timetable as an intrinsic element within the learning programme and uses appropriate forms of support that are not so much about 'hand-holding' (which can collude with students' passivity and set a tone of dependency, as is evident in the current system with increasing claims for mitigation) but more to do with developing students to become self-reliant and responsible, active learners.

Lastly, the personal development work runs contemporaneously with the academic work that students are undertaking. This allows them to dovetail their personal development to their learning needs using the former to support and facilitate the latter, and sharpens the focus of the development programme. It also allows students to discuss and explore their learning difficulties and experiences as they arise. As such the programme can flexibly adapt to the developing experience, needs and

abilities of the students, making the programme more relevant to the needs of its participants.

Conclusion

The personal development programme within my research is concerned with increasing personal and emotional development in a way that supports learning, transition and retention. It uses experiential development whereby the development process is created through the personal expression and interpretation of personal experience. As such it is a growth model that is grounded in experience and involves a holistic process of gradual adaptation to the higher learning environment.

The programme aims to develop realistic student expectations of their role and those of their tutors; to support transition into the student role; to provide relevant student-led developmental support via group work which offers an assisted opportunity to meet and socialise with other students; and provides an open forum for discussion and a source of detailed information concerning available resources.

The next chapter progresses to consider how this personal development programme fits into the wider research design.

Chapter 5

Research Design and Methods

Within Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis I identified, from within the literature, the current need for an improved system of student support together with the need to include emotions within higher learning. Chapter 4 brought these two needs together and considered how one (emotions and personal development) could be used as a means of achieving the other (a better system of student support) through the use of the person-centred philosophy. Chapter 4 was mainly concerned with drawing together the identified need for better student support and the person-centred philosophical approach, in a pragmatic sense, to derive one possible means of support in the form of a personal development programme. This chapter progresses by describing the research design and methodology that is employed within my research including its approach and techniques used within the research process for collection, arrangement and interpretation of the empirical data.

Firstly, I discuss the general methodological issues faced in attempting to research in the area of education. I develop this generalised discussion by considering how the nature of my research questions – that focus on student experience - influence the specific methodological considerations undertaken in this research, resulting in a particular research design. As part of this methodological consideration I build on the detailed discussion of the person-centred philosophy (as a potential basis of student support systems within higher education) undertaken in Chapters 2 and 4 and discuss its use as a theoretical framework that underpins the overall research strategy.

In addition I explain the underlying rationale for the selection of key elements within my research design including its principal, but not exclusively, qualitative approach, the use of a case-study design and particular techniques used in the data collection (semi-structured interviews and self-generated data) and analysis. Particular issues, including the limitations of the approach and techniques used with the research and resulting ethical issues are discussed as they arise within the body of the chapter.

Researching in the Field of Education

Researching in the education field commonly involves the consideration of aspects of the human behaviour and experience, since the process of education is inextricably linked to the individuals who are engaged in it. Verma and Mallick (1999) identify a number of considerations and limitations in relation to undertaking research concerning individuals within the field education as follows:

- The extreme complexity and variability of human behaviour.
- The difficulty of implementing rigorous controls of systematic observation and analysis with human subjects.
- The reliance on participants' recall and explanations.
- The large numbers of complex variables which are difficult to assess and interact in subtle ways.
- The difficulties inherent in generalising findings from individual subjects to wider populations.
- The potential for individuals to be influenced by the research process itself.
- The potential influence of the researcher on the research process and outcomes.
- The problems associated with human characteristics often not being directly observable and the widespread absence of research tools available to accurately measure such characteristics.

These limitations suggest that a positivist or quantitative research approach (which requires rigorous controls and research tools that provide objective measures of variables - amongst other things – in order to generalise findings) may not be optimal when researching within the area of subjective student experience. I shall return to this point a little later (see section on the demographic and attitudinal questionnaire below), but at this stage it may be helpful to remind the reader of the second of the research questions within this study (the first having been considered in the previous chapter):

- What is the impact of a programme of personal development on the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to their transition, learning development and their orientation towards remaining or withdrawing from higher education?

My study is therefore concerned with understanding the impact of one particular means of supporting students (via a personal development programme) on individuals' learning conception, approaches, attitudes, behaviours, perceptions and dispositions. Such aspects "do not exist in quantities that lend themselves readily to measurement" (Verma *et al* 1999:4). As such the aims of my study lend itself to a qualitative approach.

Moreover and as previously discussed my research framework lies within the sphere of person-centred counselling which is used to support my research on a number of levels including:

- The philosophy of person-centred counselling is used as an overarching ethos encompassing and underpinning much of the research process.
- The personal development programme is both developed and implemented using a person-centred approach.
- Self-reflective data (an important tenet within the humanistic approach) is collected from myself as the researcher.
- Lastly, critical evaluation of the research is also embedded in the reflective techniques inherent in person-centred counselling.

Clearly, the person-centred philosophy is both a pervading and significant influence within the research. Its nature, applicability and value as a theoretical framework for the research together with its use in creating a personal development programme, have been explored in Chapters 2 and 4 respectively. What is considered in this chapter is its role within the wider research approach that has been adopted.

The Research Design

As stated above, one of the aims of my research is to explore the effect of a personal development programme on students' learning experiences. This aim has driven the research design and since it concentrates on the subjective experience of individuals I adopt an approach that is 'best suited' to this purpose – namely a qualitative and experiential approach. Whilst my research is not concerned with the arguments between quantitative and qualitative methodologies *per se*, what it is concerned with is the selection of an appropriate methodology.

Rogers emphasised his belief in the fundamental predominance of the subjective – going as far as to state that although there may exist such a thing as objective truth we can, in fact never know it:

> "There is no such thing as Scientific Knowledge, there are only individual perceptions of what appears to each person to be such knowledge."
>
> (Rogers 1959:192)

There is a good degree of support for this view including that of Lynch that "...there is now a widespread questioning of the modern epistemological view that it is possible to have an objective view of reality" (1996: 146).

Brookfield (1986: 25) too raises the issue of human uniqueness (which is an inherent feature of my study) as a further impediment to the necessity of objective independence within social research, confirming that "individual learning behaviours are so idiosyncratic as to cast considerable doubt on any general assertions made about adults as learners...[they] vary so much with physiology, culture and personality that generalized statements about the nature of adult learning have very low predictive power."

Anderson, Hughes and Sharrock (1986) also suggest that hermeneutics (the theory and practice of interpretation) is "determined to show that the generalising of the natural science model of knowledge to all spheres of knowledge is unacceptable." Such writers take the view that knowledge is socially constructed and as such fundamentally composed of and influenced by the language, culture, concepts and symbols of the particular social context in which we live. This provides one

perspective of knowledge, namely that no knowledge is truly objective since all knowledge is socially constructed. This stance suggests that *meaning* is a human creation and as such it is possible to have multiple explanations or accounts of reality all of which are equally valid. This has significance for my research which rather than pursuing objective truth (whose existence may be questionable) seeks to offer explanations or accounts of reality and specific phenomena which are purposeful and meaningful at the experiential level. As such the aims of my study - which prioritise the personal and experiential aspects of student learning and seek to study individualistic, human learning experiences in the everyday context of higher learning - lend themselves to such a qualitative and experiential research approach in order to capture the complexity.

Using a qualitative framework for my research enables me, more readily to focus on the intricacies of subjective and social meaning that learning has for individuals. One approach within such a broad qualitative framework is that of phenomenology.

The phenomenological perspective is concerned with "...understanding human behaviour from the participant's own frame of reference" (Hussey and Hussey 1997: 52), and as such seeks to make known the essence of subjective personal experience. Such a perspective is, therefore, both consistent with the intent of this research – i.e. understanding the essence of human experience – but also consistent with the wider theoretical framework of the research – in that it has an easy affinity with the person-centred philosophy. As such I use a phenomenological perspective within my research, which I believe facilitates deeper insights into experiences which enables me to better understand and construct ideas about the learning development of particular groups of students.

Fry, Ketteridge and Marshall suggest that most contemporary psychologists use constructivist theories to explain human learning where: "Learning (whether in cognitive, affective, interpersonal or psychomotor domains) involves a process of individual transformation" (1999:22). Here learners are considered to develop broad conceptions or constructs of learning that model the individual's perceived reality. This is an iterative and dynamic process, wherein conceptions are adapted and modified in response to *experiences*. Such changing constructs are therefore highly

personal but also flexible enough to allow us to adapt and develop new ways of understanding issues as new constructs are formed. Experience – in its broadest sense - is therefore the driver of learning. This is important within my research, where in Chapter 2, I discussed a range of learning conceptions (A to F) as indicative of learner development. By considering students predominant strands of learning conception across time it may be possible to gain an insight into the pattern and progress (if any) of their learning development. I shall return to this idea in the discussion of my results in Chapter 6.

One further aspect of my research, beyond focusing on the experiential impact of a programme of personal development on students, is that I, in collaboration with the student, play an integral role in the design, implementation and reflection of the impact of this programme. Cotton legitimises such collaboration: "Because experience is of primary importance for the student, humanistic psychologists have to use research techniques which acknowledge the participants as joint experimenters rather than subjects" (1995:110). My research approach is therefore a joint endeavour with students, the benefit of which is described by Outhwaite: "Understanding is not a matter of trained, methodological, unprejudiced technique, but an encounter...a confrontation with something radically different from ourselves" (1991:24).

May (1997) also suggests that hermeneutic principles no longer require the researcher to disengage from the subject matter, but encourage a connection with it as a prerequisite of understanding social life: "Our sense of belonging to a society and the techniques used to understand it are not impediments to our studies, but necessary conditions for us to undertake research. Contrary to positivism and empiricism, the social researcher now stands at the centre of the research process as a requirement of understanding social life" (1997:14).

This also holds significance for my research since I as the researcher position myself within the research processes that seek to understand the social phenomena of student experience. Such researcher involvement is supported by Verma *et al* who "stresses a more involved role by the researcher in seeking to understand the reality from the point of view of the individuals being studied" (1999:38). Pring (2000:138) too emphasises the importance of educators undertaking the research role as

> "crucial to the growth of professional knowledge...It is a refreshing counterbalance to those who, in treating 'educational practice' as an object of science, necessarily fail to understand it. It is a reassertion of the crucial place of professional judgement in an understanding of a professional activity."

May (1997) is also critical of the frequent devaluing of the researcher's personal experiences as too subjective and contests that researchers' biographies can be a fundamental part of the research process and a source of rich experiential research data. One of the important tenets of the person-centred approach is self-reflection. Since my research is founded within this approach I engaged in self–reflection and recorded my perceptions within a personal journal. This provided a source of data which was useful in making sense of the progression of the personal development programme and its impacts on students. As such my approach is consistent with the view that:

> "...research is a process conducted *with* people and not *on* them...First, experience is not seen as inferior to theory, rather, experience is part of what 'generates' theory. Secondly, research is built on the interconnectedness between researcher and researched, shifting the emphasis from observation towards interactions." (Vince and Broussine 1996:9 – Emphasis is author's own)

Given the personal nature of my research and the need for me to engage with participants as individuals at a deep and genuine level I felt that it was both desirable and inevitable that I *interact* and *connect* with students. As such the selection of an experiential approach appears most appropriate in order to facilitate the optimum research climate and also to capture the individuality and uniqueness of participants.

Lynch suggests that a further consideration in terms of the rigor of a research approach is its degree of internal consistency which he defines as:

> "...a consistent logic *from* the philosophical basis of the research *to* the way in which the focus of the research is approached and the research questions

phrased *to* the research methods that are selected and *to* the conclusions that are drawn from the research." (1996: 144 – Emphasis is author's own)

My research uses the person-centred approach as its philosophical basis, which has directed and influenced the focus of the research, its methods, instruments and analysis. It is hoped that this provides a consistent logic throughout my research, which strengthens its internal consistency.

The nature of my research is such that I am primarily concerned with understanding the detailed experiential accounts of learning development in response to one particular personal development initiative. As such the depth of understanding takes precedence over the breadth of the study. This requirement led me to consider the use of a case study approach which Verma *et al* (1999:81) suggest is "essentially a research in depth rather than breadth...an intensive analysis and evolutionary description of an individual." Furthermore an intrinsic part of my research strategy was to explore the experience of individual students exposed to personal development support in situ – i.e. as their higher education progressed as a real and live event. The need to undertake the research within the university environment further supported the use of a case study approach within my research. The next part of this chapter therefore discusses the case study approach and explores its suitability in relation to my research.

The Case Study Approach

As mentioned above, one of the key features of my research is that it seeks to assess the impact of personal development support on the learning experience of students as it occurs and over time. As such it is neither possible (nor desirable) to draw a clear distinction between the phenomenon being studied and its context – i.e. the student experience and their learning. The inter-connectedness of these aspects requires the application of a research method that permits such a close association. The case study approach offers this facility, and is defined by Yin (1991:23) as:

> "...inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which multiple sources of evidence are used."

This ability of the case study method to include its context is also supported by Eisenhardt who describes the approach as "a research study which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within a single setting" (1989: 534). Such a method is therefore ideally suited to my study which seeks to gain information about the nature, process and complexity of the learning experience of students over time, facilitating the study of that experience 'live' as perceived and interpreted by the participants. Sarantakos (2000:192) describes this ability of the case study approach to "...study whole units in their totality and not aspects or variables of these units."

More significantly, my research desires to place the student at the centre of the research, as a major player in the construction of the personal development programme, and the principal driver of the discursive focus of the sessions. This is not only necessary in order to support the relevance of the research focus but also as an intrinsic part of the development of student autonomy and responsibility – i.e. their transition into higher learners. The use of the case study approach is consistent with this empowering aim – which is also an inherent and central tenet within the person-centred philosophical approach of the research - since it "...perceives the respondent as an expert and not just as a source of data" Sarantakos (2000:192).

A final important feature of the case study approach that further strengthens its relevance and appropriateness to my research is that it permits the study of a phenomenon in a high degree of intensity and detail (Bryman 2001). This also allows the idiographic or unique features of the participants within the research to be fully elucidated. This sits comfortably within the larger phenomenological and inductive framework of this research, since what is sought is a detailed understanding of individual, subjective human experience to support theory proposition rather than an objective overview that one can generalise from. Burns (2000:474) emphasises the value of case studies in terms of its ability to be "...generalisable to theoretical propositions, not to statistical populations...[where] the investigator's goal is to expand theories and not to undertake statistical generalisation."

As such the case study is well placed to focus on circumstantial uniqueness, where complex environments and interactions between the respondents and this context are included. Human experience is not a simple phenomenon and my research recognises that experience is embedded in personal, social, cultural, learning and other contexts and rather than detracting from its merit this only serves to enhance the depth of research.

At this point it may be helpful to indicate the 2 cases within my research and describe how they arose. The cases comprised a small group of students (11 in total) who took part in the personal development programme and a further group of 11 students, drawn from the same cohort as the former, who did not participate in the programme. This provided me with 2 cases – participating and non-participating students.

Participating students were self-selected. During the first week of the academic year 2000/01, I issued a standard letter (Appendix 2) to all students enrolled on the first year of the BA (Hon) Accounting and Finance at the University of Greenville (pseudonym), requesting volunteers to take part in a learning support group – aimed at supporting students' learning. From the cohort, 11 students volunteered to take part. As such a self-selected sample was generated. Such self-selection may have some implications for the research in terms of introducing an element of potential 'bias'. The notion of 'bias' is only applicable from a scientific or objectivist perspective and as such its influence is mitigated to a large extent by the fact that my research adopts a socially constructed view of knowledge which seeks to understand the subjective experience of individuals. It does not pursue objective truths, which would require a representative sample to be drawn in order that the results of statistical analyses could be subsequently generalised across the whole of the population.

In addition the use of a self-selected sample in this research also permits the recognition of other important ethical and methodological considerations namely:

- *Ethical considerations* of making the programme available to everyone, yet not mandating its selection. Individuals' right to not participate in the research was therefore recognised. The opportunity to participate was open to each student

within the designated cohort, on an equal basis. As such no one student was disadvantaged in terms of not being offered this form of support in comparison to other students. This is especially important given the current highly competitive higher educational environment. Of course the same equality of opportunity could have been achieved if the course had merely been conducted with all students. However, this leads us into the second area of concern.

- *Issues of methodological internal consistency.* I felt that it was important to protect the right of students not to participate in my research. If the course had been run with all students within the cohort it would remove any element of choice on the part of the student. Clearly, since the person-centred philosophy centres on encouraging self-responsibility, control over decisions and freedom of choice, it would contravene the founding principles of the approach if the programme of personal development was compulsory. In order for the person-centred philosophy to pervade all areas of the research it was clearly important to be consistent at this stage and offer the students the choice to participate or not. This protected the integrity of the internal consistency of the research philosophy by allowing students initial engagement with the programme of personal development to be established on a person-centred foundation. It is interesting to note that in terms of the professional person-centred counselling arena, no client is accepted unless they make the decision to come to therapy – i.e. third party referrals are not accepted, and there must be informed consent on the part of the participant. This professional requirement is mirrored within my research with all participants giving their informed consent through self-selection.

An additional option may have been to attempt to establish which students were most in need of supported personal development support, and to direct the programme only to this cluster of students. However it is difficult and problematic to attempt to define such 'at risk' students. There is a vast body of literature exploring the issue of why some students pass and others fail their academic courses. Many of the findings in this area are narrow, conflicting and often contradictory. One avenue of research undertaken by Gracia *et al* (2002) attempts to develop a predictive model that highlights students with a particular profile as linked to a higher risk of academic failure within the accounting and finance field. However, this model is currently

being tested. As such, in the absence of any effective method of identifying at risk students this did not appear a viable option.

Therefore, in light of these practical, philosophical and ethical issues discussed above, I considered the use of a self-selected sample within my research to be both an appropriate and acceptable way of identifying participants. Such a self-selecting strategy is not however without its risks, since it was a possibility that no or very few students would wish to participate in the research. However, I did not have any difficulty in recruiting participants, who gave a variety of reasons for their desire to participate including their views that it would help them to settle in, do well, meet others, self-improve and be a source of support generally for them. My experience of the motivation of participants mirrored that of Hutchinson and Wilson (1994:306) who found that: "Participants in research and therapeutic interviews do so for a variety of reasons such as achieving 'self-acknowledgement, self-awareness, catharsis, empowerment, as a sense of purpose, social status and looking good'..." Non-participants gave a variety of reasons for their non-participation including; being too busy; not interested; dislike group-work; confident about their level of learning development and a preference for working alone.

The 11 student volunteers were split into 2 groups – comprising 5 and 6 students respectively. Each group was subsequently exposed to a 12-week programme of personal development (as described in Chapter 4) that ran alongside their first term of study – commencing in October 2000.

In identifying participants for the study, it was hoped to capture some of the diversity of the student cohort, in terms of age, prior educational background, and gender, though in no way was the sample intended to be representative of the population. Of those who participated in the study 4 were male and 7 were female. 7 of the students had come directly from school or sixth-form college and of the remaining 4 students, 2 were mature women-returners and the remaining 2 had given up their careers to retrain in a different field. During our first session together we undertook some personal introductions. This allowed students to talk for a little while about themselves, their backgrounds and their expectations of and reasons for attending the personal development sessions. A short vignette of each of the student participants,

derived from their self-descriptions and my personal perceptions of them after our first meeting of the personal development programme is contained within Appendix 3 – names have been changed to protect students' anonymity. These vignettes introduce participants in a way that I hope enables the reader to begin to develop an appreciation of the subjective reality and individual character of each participant and brings alive the fact that each student is a 'real' person who arrives at university with a unique and personal set of experiences.

Reviewing these profiles reveals that most students (P1, P2, P5, P7, P8, P9, and P11) would fall within the earlier definition (see Chapter 3) of non-traditional either by virtue of their age, social status, ethnicity or lack of family background in higher education. While their experiences cannot be generalised to the entire university cohort, they do focus attention on the experience of non-traditional entrants and in so doing provide insight into the important issues faced by such students within higher education today. In contrast, the traditional students amongst the participants may provide some useful comparisons.

Many of the participating students were 'local' and this fits with both the wider demographic profile of students at the University of Greenville and the research studies that demonstrate that disadvantaged students choose to remain within their regions to attend higher education. Some also have employment responsibilities. This too may be linked to disadvantage as Reay *et al* find that: "Those working over 10 hours per week were also concentrated at the lower end of the socio-economic scale...Exclusionary processes operate within the field of higher education itself with far more working-class than middle-class students undertaking paid employment." (2001:861-2)

The experiences and development of these 11 participating students (case 1) were then considered against the experiences and development of 11 non-participating students (case 2) randomly drawn from the same cohort. Data for this was derived from semi-structured interviews which I discuss later in this chapter.

To summarise, case studies have been used within my research design to:

- Study the student learning experience in situ – connected to and influenced by its wider learning context.
- Gather 'live' or contemporaneous data.
- Privilege the subjective experiences and perceptions of students in order to yield thick descriptive data.
- Restricts the imposition of an 'alien and theoretical understanding not used by individuals' (Pring 2000:41).
- Negotiate understanding between the researcher and the researched by narrowing the distance between the two.
- Generate theoretical propositions that contribute to a wider understanding of the mechanisms and implications of drives to create social inclusion within higher education.

The case study approach within my research permits consideration of the influence of the wider learning context on student experience. It is to this university context – the University of Greenville - which this chapter now turns.

The University of Greenville

Although research conducted in a single site may be problematic in terms of its representativeness (to the extent that this is desired), I decided to undertake my research within one university. Within the literature there is no precedent for an investigation into using personal development to support non-traditional students and as such this section describes my rationale for choosing one particular institution.

My research works with students drawn from the first year of the Accounting & Finance degree programme within the University of Greenville. . The university resides within a County Borough that has been identified as an area of particular social and economic deprivation and was allocated Objective 1 status under the European Union Grant Aid arrangements for Wales in 2001. The European Union uses the following characteristics as indicators of Objective 1 status:

a. High levels of unemployment
b. Poor infrastructure
c. Low population density
d. Few large towns
e. Poorly educated and trained population
f. Low productive agrarian economy

In addition to being located directly within a County Borough that has Objective 1 status, it also shares a border with two other Objective 1 County Boroughs. As such the university's nature is coloured by the widespread social deprivation surrounding it. This has important implications for the university, especially in terms of student recruitment. Most students are drawn from the local communities and as such a good degree of its students come from socially disadvantaged and working-class backgrounds – many of which are admitted without the traditional 'A' level qualifications.

This phenomenon of students from working class areas choosing to attend local universities is not peculiar to the University of Greenville and is understood within the literature. Reay *et al* find that working-class student experiences are "saturated with a localism that was absent from those from economically privileged students" and that they operate within "...very limited spaces of choice...[and] are geographically constrained. " (2001:861)

The university's location within such an area has implications in terms of attracting students, breaking cultural barriers to higher education, raising learning expectations, developing partnership links with local business and engaging with the wider economic regeneration of the area. The university is therefore both challenged and characterised by its physical location.

Given this particular profile, I selected this university as the contextual setting for my research for a number of reasons. Firstly, and most importantly, it was selected because the primary focus of the research rests largely on the experience of socially disadvantaged and non-traditional students. The University of Greenville is rich in this 'type' of student and an analysis of its student demographic profile reported by

the BBC (2002) ranks it within the top 20% of UK universities (total of 163) in terms of the level of social inclusion it achieves.

As such I purposely selected this particular university since it offers the potential to illuminate features or processes relating to non-traditional students' learning experiences which are central to my study. Denzin and Lincoln support the use of purposive selection where researchers "...seek out groups, settings and individuals where...the processes being studied are most likely to occur." (1994:202)

Secondly, this post-1992 university is experiencing particular difficulties in terms of retaining students, and is ranked within the same BBC (2002) table in the bottom 6% of UK universities, in terms of the drop-out rates of its students. This is a significant problem for the university, and as such it is particularly important for this and similar institutions to address the issue of retention. As discussed in Chapter 3, studies reveal that the post-1992 universities have most actively responded to calls for widening access and this has been associated with falling retention rates amongst these institutions. Since the focus of my research rests primarily on the issues of transition, learning and retention in relation to non-traditional students, such a post-1992 institution offers a particular opportunity to explore these phenomena.

Thirdly, as the researcher I was an employee of this institution at the time of the research. The research methodology I employ requires an intimate involvement of the researcher with the researched participants in terms of developing and facilitating the programme, collecting the data, being able to provide support and working closely with students over prolonged periods of time. As such it was important that I was able to fully participate within the research process. Due to this the University of Greenville provided an opportunity to secure full and practical access to the student body that would have been very difficult to secure within another institution.

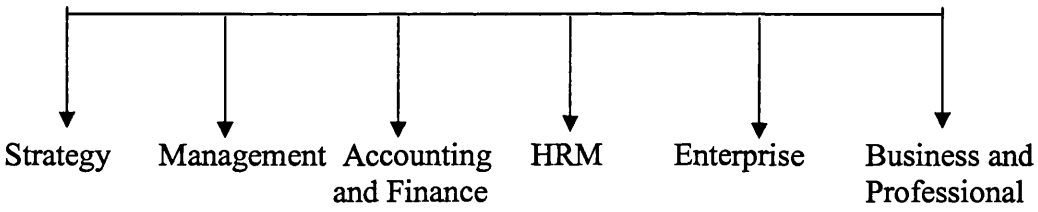
As mentioned earlier, my research takes place within the Accounting and Finance Division of the Business School within the University of Greenville which is collectively made up of eight schools – technology; computing; electronics; humanities and social sciences; law; business; science and care sciences – the largest of which is the Business School.

It has approximately 18,000 students of which about 1,900 are international students coming from over fifty different countries. Its mission statement is:

> To be a premier UK modern university and to advance the wider international Higher Education context, the economic, social and cultural priorities of Wales. (University of Greenville:2003)

The Business School is split into a range of divisions as shown in Figure 5.1 below:

Figure 5.1: Divisional Structure of the University of Greenville Business School



The Division of Accounting and Finance employs sixteen full-time members of academic staff (including myself at the time of the research) and has approximately 325 students enrolled on a variety of accounting and finance undergraduate, professional (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants), and postgraduate programmes of study. The majority of these students however are enrolled on the BA (Hon) Accounting and Finance degree programme.

The programme is flexible in terms of its admissions policy and accepts learners with a wide range of prior experience and learning. The programme has traditionally recruited students from a range of backgrounds but most coming from the surrounding locality, although this is balanced by a small number of students from other areas within the UK and overseas. Available statistics on the demographic profile of the student population show that broadly, there is an increasing proportion of:

- local students

- students from ethnic minority backgrounds
- mature students
- students with disabilities and other particular learning needs.

This pattern reflects the current initiatives within higher education to widen access to non-traditional students.

The area of accounting and finance is very vocational with the majority of students securing employment with a range of accounting and financial institutions and organisations upon graduation. The division has been recognised for its quality of teaching – gaining an excellent rating in its latest Teaching Quality Assessment by the Quality Assurance Agency. However, within the division, the annual monitoring exercise (an integral part of the review process) of 1999/2000 identified the following key issues/areas for development and improvement:

- student retention – (see below for statistics)
- reactive student support
- high levels of passivity and poor attendance amongst students
- failure of the first year of study to adequately prepare students for the academic rigour of subsequent stages of study. This impedes successful transition into the second year and consequently results in higher attrition rates than would be expected at this second level.

Statistics from the BA (Hon) Accounting & Finance (Greenville) - Level 1 – 2000/01 cohort show that:

(i) 15% of the cohort withdrew from the course before the end of their first year.
(ii) The studies of a further 14% of the cohort were discontinued at the end of the first year.
(iii) Only 20% of the cohort passed all 10 modules that comprise the first year of study at the first sitting.

These figures make depressing reading, but to avoid any 'knee-jerk' reactions to creating better support for these students I began to consider the impact of nature of the programme of study itself on the type of support that was needed. The student development work undertaken in my research works with students who are enrolled on a vocational course. The majority of students who undertake the BA (Hon) Accounting and Finance progress to secure employment within the professional accounting and finance sector. This has clear implications for the research in that it is important that their learning experiences and outcomes whilst within higher education prepare them for the professional world they are about to face. This is of concern to this study since this research seeks to influence self-development and change in relation to a student's attitude and approach to learning. As such it is important that any such changes would not prejudice a student beyond the higher education arena. Clearly it would be unethical to encourage a shift in learning approaches that focuses on the experience and process of learning if this would leave students disadvantaged within the professional world. However, the criticisms levied at higher education institutions for their increasing focus on cognition in terms of their almost exclusive focus on knowledge and skills acquisition may also hold true within the professional accounting world. This adds another layer of validity or justification to support students movement away from this technical focus.

Deppe, Sonderegger, Stice, Clark and Streuling (1991) demonstrate the widely accepted view that the role and work environments of professional accountants are increasingly dynamic and that accounting education must keep pace with these changes in order to educate and train future accountants appropriately. Indeed existing accounting education has been heavily criticised (see Sundem and Williams, 1992 and Albrecht and Sack, 2000) for placing its emphasis on the transference of technical knowledge at the expense of developing individuals in a wider range of knowledge and skills necessary for working in the 21st century.

Accounting education, in line with other higher education programmes appears to need to shift from being content driven towards a focus on the process of learning and the subjective development of the learner. Such changes are widely embraced within the profession. The International Federation of Accountants (IFAC), which comprises 156 professional accountancy bodies world-wide, concurs that "...the education and

experience of professional accountants must provide a foundation of knowledge, skills and professional values that enable them to continue to learn and adapt to change throughout their professional lives." (IFAC, 1996, Para 7)

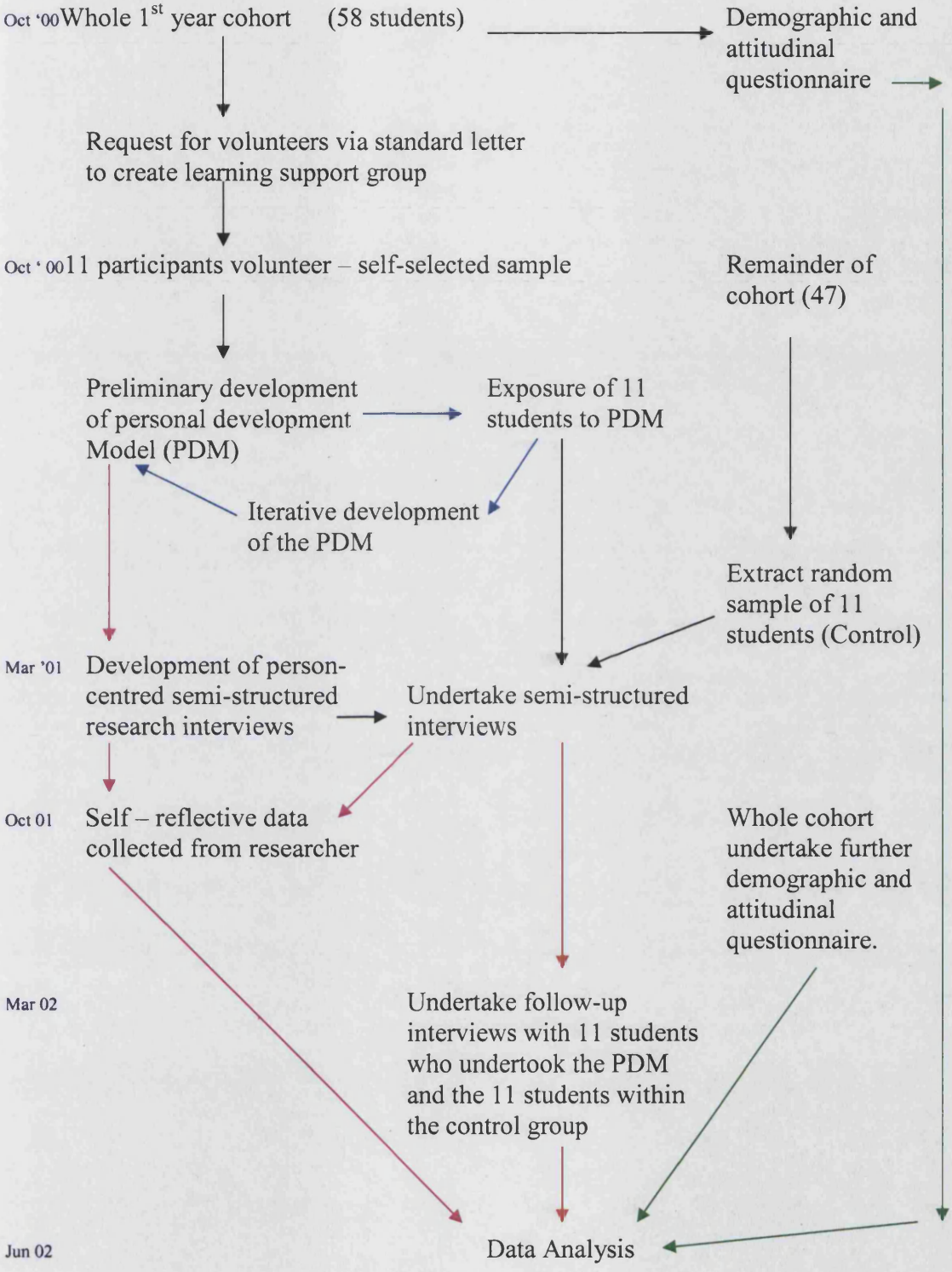
These findings appear to support the use of broader learning development and personal development within accounting higher education. However, the issues of student retention, poor academic performance, and inadequate student support are not only of critical concern within particular sectors, but also, more generally, across the whole of the higher education sector. Student withdrawal is costly in terms of the lost income stream to the host University, and is a situation that is likely to be exacerbated by current Government initiatives to widen access to higher education and increase participation rates. The impact of these latter issues of widening access and their heightening effect on the need for appropriate developmental support have been explored in Chapter 3.

The earlier literature reviewed in Chapter 2 suggests that the problems of poor academic performance and retention may be linked to inadequate student support systems – the latter exacerbating the difficulties of transition and progression. In conjunction with this literature I am arguing that appropriate student support may occupy a central and crucial position in relation to supporting students' transition into higher education and perhaps more importantly their retention within it. Retention is a politically sensitive and very important aspect of higher education – not only in terms of published league tables and the loss of funding to institutions, but also in term of the personal costs to the students themselves. In 2002 the University of Greenville Business School and University performance in the league tables in this area was poor – 25% dropout across the University compared to a rate of 15% across Wales. This represented a serious problem for the institution in terms of public perception, student experience, funding and its forward movement to meet strategic aims. Developing relevant student support may therefore provide one mechanism of addressing these problems. Using a personal development programme within my research therefore aims to support student higher learning in this particular institution, in a number of ways including:

- Improving first-year student retention by seeking to understand the experiences that lead up to student withdrawal.
- Reducing failure rates across first year modules by supporting students in becoming self-directed in their learning.
- Linking with the pastoral support role within the Business School by raising students' awareness of the pastoral tutoring service and assisting students in developing strategies to manage personal issues as they arise. This is an important aspect given the increase in the numbers of applications made by students to the Mitigating Circumstances Committee. This provides an opportunity for pastoral tutoring to become a more pro-active service.
- Enhancing the student experience via use of humanistic techniques, which adopt a holistic view of the student. The increase in student numbers and the drive towards anonymity in assessment can de-personalise the learning process. The personal development programme may redress the balance by emphasising the personal dimension and strengthening the sense of self within the learning process.
- Facilitating successful transition (in terms of timing and degree) to support students in maximising their learning potential whilst at university.

It may be useful at this stage to set out the overall research process in a schematic diagram (see Figure 5.2 below) and to progress by discussing the remaining aspects of the research design.

Figure 5.2: Schematic Illustration of the Research Process



KEY

= administrative/procedural task
= creation/design of personal development model
= collection of self-reflective data
= design and implementation of person-centred semi-structured interviews
= collection of demographic and attitudinal data

(i) Demographic and Attitudinal Questionnaire

As discussed above the predominant research approach used within my research is qualitative, through the use of a case study method. However this type of approach does raise some philosophical difficulties which Pring summarises as:

- The need for the researcher to have an open mind and let the data speak for itself.
- The difficulty in generalising findings to a population.
- Questions concerning the "*objectivity* of the research, the *reality* which is exposed and the *truth* of the claims being made." (2000:42)

He suggests that these limitations arise, in part, from the polarisation of researchers' thinking into the quantitative and qualitative research approaches. He is critical of this "epistemological, sharp distinction made between quantitative and qualitative research" and "the contrast drawn between quantitative research which is seen as appropriate to the physical world (and wrongly applied to the personal and social) and qualitative research which addresses that which is distinctive of the personal and social" (2002:43). Moreover, he accuses educational researchers of constructing a 'false-dualism' between these two supposedly contrasting approaches which is both "simplistic and erroneous since the social world and educational practice is more complex than this dualism allows" (2002:47). He suggests that the reality of educational practice calls for a blurring of the contrived distinction between research approaches where, through methodological triangulation, a fuller understanding of issues could be derived.

Others, including Scott and Usher (1999:97) agree that methodological polarisation can be problematic since it creates "the possibility of epistemological crises, because rational inquiry is always dependent upon the relations within the particular tradition within which it exists. Knowing, therefore always has to be located within particular ways of knowing, and is therefore always context bound."

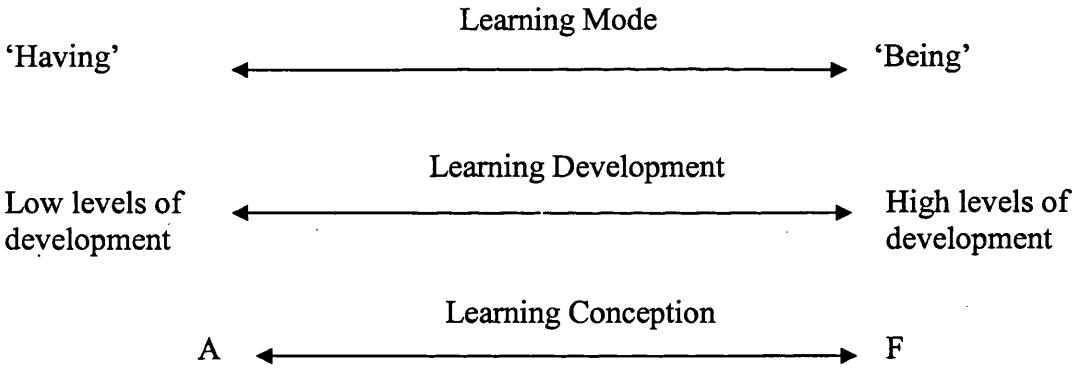
I found this particular methodological debate had relevance for my research which although residing predominantly within a qualitative framework I understood that each individual student commences university with a different and subjective level of personal development. If the aim of my study was to explore changes in this level of development it may be helpful to make some form of quantitative assessment of the opening and closing positions. I do not see using such a quantitative technique within an overall qualitative approach as being problematic given the calls described above to move away from a purist view of research to something that is more pragmatic and relevant. Verma *et al* (1999:10) suggest that when investigating subjective matters (such as the feelings and dispositions of individuals which lie at the heart of my work) where it is difficult to make generalisations, there is a need to "adopt a research strategy incorporating qualitative judgements and quantitative measurements." Silverman concurs with this view and claims that comparing different kinds of data (e.g. quantitative and qualitative) enables corroboration and validation of findings. As such, a mixed approach – such as that used within my research - may enable triangulation of findings that strengthens subsequent understanding.

A review of the existing literature revealed that no definitive instrument existed to 'measure' levels of learning development. Undeterred by this, I developed a questionnaire instrument (Appendix 1) that recorded demographic and attitudinal data and issued it to all students (N = 58) entering the BA (Hon) Accounting & Finance in the academic year 2000/01. All students completed the questionnaire twice – once during the first week and again during the last week of their first year of undergraduate study. This enabled me to collect opening and closing data which may provide insight into any changes or developments – but not how they had occurred – during students first year of study.

I developed my questionnaire from understanding drawn from the literature, principally in relation to Fromm's (1982) theoretical distinction between students who adopt a 'having' mode of learning and those who use a 'being' mode (discussed in Chapter 2 and outlined in Table 2.1). Within the questionnaire I present a series of statements to students, their responses to which attempt to indicate a student's underlying tendency either towards a 'having' or 'being' learning disposition. Responses were recorded and analysed to produce what I refer to as a 'cumulative

orientation score' both at the beginning and end of their first year of study. I use this score as a rough guide to a students' general and dominant learning mode or conception by positioning individuals along a learning mode continuum which I translate into a general rating of a students' level of learning development at a point in time. I therefore attempt a simplistic association (based on the previous literature) between a student's dominant learning mode or approach and their level of learning development. My interpretation of the scores are that the more towards the 'being' end of the continuum a student scores the higher their level of personal learning development or conception, since the characteristics of 'being' learning are broadly analogous with developed conceptions. This simplistic linear relationship is illustrated in Figure 5.3 below:

Figure 5.3: Relationship between Learning Mode, Development and Conception.



The first completion of the questionnaire records the opening level of personal development that a student possesses as they begin their higher learning experience. The second completion of the same questionnaire records the closing level of personal development at the end of the first year of academic study. Responses to each of the attitudinal statements – half of which indicated having dispositions and the other half being dispositions - were recorded on a Likert scale and as such a linear score was applied to each response (positive statements scoring 5 for a strongly agree response through to 1 for a strongly disagree response, with the reverse scoring being applied to negative statements) within the 'having:being' classifications. Individual scores for each student were aggregated across the 'having:being' classifications to provide a 'cumulative orientation score' for both having and being dispositions. These

measures provided opening and closing benchmarks for each individual student. This allowed a rough gauge of any changes over time in terms of personal learning development, or shifts in learning conception to be identified for each individual student from their subjectively rated responses.

The questionnaire was piloted, prior to its distribution to the main body of students using a small group of undergraduate students (12) enrolled on the BA (Hon) Business Studies in the academic year 2000/01. These students were selected because of their parity with the students within the research group. Some minor adjustments were subsequently made to the questionnaire following the comments of the pilot group.

Clearly the questionnaire is limited in that it is restricted to making a one-dimensional, linear (and therefore crude) assessment of the level or stage of personal learning development that a student has attained. However, this classification of students is an attempt to recognise that each individual student starts off with a different and subjective level of personal development. If developmental progress is to be assessed it may be helpful to have a record (albeit a simplistic one) of the starting point for individual students. Furthermore, issues of learning development and conception are complex and the questionnaire is limited in its ability to capture this since it effectively ascribes a numeric value or score to these complexities and implies that the differential between each of the scoring points is constant. However, its use within my research is indicative only of learning development, used only as an adjunct to the deep experiential interview data which provides the insight into the nature and extent of any learning development.

The questionnaire also collected a small amount of demographic data that I used to explore the nature of the self-selected sample against the context of the wider population of the whole cohort – see Table 5.1 below. This is therefore useful in contextualising the qualitative data within the subsequent data analysis.

Table 5.1: Demographic Profile of Participants in Comparison with Cohort.

Variable	Participants	Cohort
Age – average	21.9 years	20.8 years
Age – range	18 – 35	18 – 42
Gender - % Female	64%	59%
Prior study of accountancy (%)	35%	42%

This brief analysis reveals no significant differences between the demographic profile of the sample group against the wider cohort profile.

(ii) Semi-Structured Interviews

This section firstly considers the appropriateness of semi-structured interviewing as a method of data collection, and its suitability within my research. It progresses to discuss my approach to such interviewing using a person-centred philosophy which includes consideration of the ethical context of research interviewing as it arises.

Unstructured and semi-structured interviews are usually associated with a phenomenological paradigm. Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe (1991) suggest they are an appropriate method when attempting to understand the interviewee's subjective reality or perceptions surrounding an issue, especially if the issue is confidential or sensitive in nature, or if the truth is difficult to establish for the interviewee.

They are employed by a myriad of user-groups that includes clinicians, administrators, counsellors, employers, consultants, sociologists, and psychologists as well as researchers in their search for meaning (Hyman, Cobb, Feldman, Hart and Stember 1975). Exponents of semi-structured and unstructured interviewing place emphasis on their exploratory ability and since my research is concerning with exploring the impact of a programme of personal development on students' higher education experience I chose to use them.

Their beneficial use within qualitative research is widely accepted and their principal strengths include:

- The process of open discovery that takes place within them - Hussey & Hussey (1997).
- The ability to observe the non-verbal communications of participants.
- The ability to explore human experience, feeling and attitudes at a deep level, particularly where the interviewee may be reluctant to tell the truth or struggles when trying to understand what lies behind their thoughts, beliefs or feelings - Easterby-Smith *et al* (1991)

Despite being an important phenomenological research tool, used to capture 'rich' data that has both quality and depth in terms of the subtleties and detail of the phenomena being studied, the technique is not without its limitations, which include:

- Interviewer bias – the effect of the individual characteristics of the interviewer on the process.
- Interviewee perceptions – tendency to provide what are considered acceptable or correct responses.
- Interview effects – the interview is a very artificial situation, which may adversely impact on the interviewee.
- Truth barriers may exist if the interview seeks to explore sensitive, embarrassing issues, or areas that are difficult in some way for the interviewee.

The mitigation of these limitations has been the focus of several commentators. Lee (1993) suggests that increasing the depth of interviews can lessen the impact of such limitations. Laslett and Rapoport (1975) argue that collaborative interviewing enhances the quality of research by increasing internal validity. This technique makes use of transference and counter-transference - where an interviewee is encouraged to project feelings from past experiences onto the interviewer and vice versa - borrowed from the psychoanalytical field. Within such an approach these psychodynamic occurrences are regarded as data.

Gorden (1987) found that whilst most researchers recognise interviews as social interactions, the literature on interview strategy and technique largely ignores this social dimension. Instead its primary focus is on maximising the flow of valid, reliable information from respondents while minimising the distortion of the interviewer and interview situation on what the respondent knows.

Holstein & Gubrium highlight this paradox as a significant weakness in the traditional approach:

> "Both parties to the interview are necessarily and unavoidably **active**. Each is involved in meaning-making work. Meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through respondent replies; it is actively and communicatively assembled in the interview encounter...attempts to strip interviews of their interactional ingredients will be futile."
>
> (1995:4 Emphasis is author's own)

As discussed earlier in this chapter, my research uses a person-centred framework as a pervading and overarching ethos within the research. Writers suggest that this philosophy is not only portable but of particular use wherever honest, open dialogue is sought - Mearns & Thorne (1988), Greenberg, Rice and Elliott (1993). Since the research interview is essentially an inter-personal relationship whose primary aim is to seek honest, open dialogue, it appeared sensible to extend this approach into my interviewing. In this way I am treating the interview as a social encounter in an attempt to enhance the meaning-making discourse which moves away from the detached view of interviewees as the passive holders of already-existing answers whose extraction is best elicited by avoiding the development of any relationship with them. Furthermore in taking this approach I am recognising the social context and relationship that exist between the interviewer and the interviewee.

Particular aspects of my person-centred approach to my research interviews with students are contained in Table 5.2 below:

Table 5.2: Features of my Person-Centred Approach to Semi-Structured Interviewing.

PERSON-CENTRED APPROACH
1 Interviewer stance • I adopted a congruent (as opposed to a neutral) approach towards the interviewee and strove to be myself, as a person, during the interview avoiding, where possible, concealing myself in order to 'play' the interviewer's role – frequently referred to as 'playing dumb' (Becker and Geer (1957) or 'friendly but restrained' McNeil (1985)), which can be viewed as disingenuous and manipulative. • Part of this congruence involved me showing warmth and adopting a transparent stance that at times involved self-disclosure, rather than maintaining a professional distance and adopting an opaque stance with no self-disclosure.
2 Position on acceptance • I used UPR (unconditional positive regard) throughout the interviews, actively offering positive acceptance to the interviewee. This is in contrast to the approach suggested by Fowler and Mangione (1990) where the interviewer remains passive throughout giving no feedback or indication that any response is considered correct or acceptable. • I therefore actively offered acceptance of all responses rather than relying on passively implied acceptance via continuation of the interview.
3 View on social interaction • I accepted the view of the interview as a social interaction within which the inter-personal relationship is used to allow the interviewer to play an active role in the meaning-making. This moves away from the perception of the social interaction as a form of interviewer bias and as such detrimental to the objectivity and validity of the data collected. This places me as a participant in the process of meaning-making rather than seeking to limit any effect I had on the extraction of meaning. This moves away from the notion that any interview can achieve "undistorted communication" Holstein & Gubrium (1995).
4 Role of interviewee • Interviewees conceived as active participants who construct and develop their responses within the interview situation, as opposed to already possessing the 'answers' which are merely revealed when the appropriate question is posed by interviewers. • I used the interview situation as an active process – a tool to develop understanding rather than as a passive technique – a tool to extract understanding.
5 Locus of evaluation • A non-judgemental and accepting climate was used during the interviews to permit the locus of evaluation to be internal to the interviewee. The interviewees' responses were therefore supported in being based on their own internal values. This avoided the use of a passive and neutral interview climate which may create a tendency for the interviewee to feel judged by the standards, values or demands of the interviewer and the interview situation itself. In this climate the locus of evaluation may shift

	to become external to the interviewee.
6	**Power and control** • Using person-centred techniques supports a relationship of equals. Using a non-judgemental and accepting stance helps to lessen any power imbalance, as interviewees are allowed to 'be' as they are, even if that is nervous, stressed etc. This is in contrast to an approach where the interviewer takes control of the relationship, whose initial focus is on making the interviewee 'feel' relaxed. This is a direct attempt to manipulate - 'put at ease' - the participant's emotional state into a particular way of being.
7	**Role of emotion** • Complete acceptance of the role of emotion in the interview, which enabled the participant to develop self-understanding, thereby creating meaningful responses. This did not require a restricted focus on neutral questioning designed to evoke narrow intellectual responses.
8	**Deriving understanding** • I made extensive use of reflective techniques throughout the interview which uses empathic understanding as a means of exploring the interviewees' responses, rather than using follow–up questions to derive meaning from interviewees' responses. • Such reflection is concerned with understanding what is said and also conveying that understanding to the interviewee, to 'check-out' my understanding.
9	**Search for meaning** • I placed my emphasis on the participant searching for his/her own meaning and saw my role as facilitating this personal search. This prioritised the interviewees meaning rather than the interviewers second-hand interpretation of the interviewees meaning • Attempts to achieve a deeper level of understanding of the participant.

My decision to use a person-centred approach within my interviews was not only driven by a desire to use a consistent approach throughout my research, but also by the potential benefits that such an approach can bring to the interview process and subsequent data collection. Person-centeredness in the interviewing context is not just about learning a set of techniques; it is about a way of being: "An open-ended question is just an open-ended question. Being person-centred is about a philosophical way of being" (Vincent 1999). Key aspects of my person-centred approach to interviewing are discussed in the section below:

1 The Challenge to Neutrality and Passivity

It is a facet of human nature that people respond differently to individuals, depending on their personal perceptions of those individuals. This fluctuating response also occurs in the interview situation where perceptions are based on the interviewer's personal identity, self-presentation, and style of interviewing.

Whilst little can be done to mitigate the impact of an interviewer's personal identity, in terms of their age, sex, ethnic origin, accent, and physiognomy, some writers suggest that interviewers should address their self-presentation by adopting a passive and neutral stance.

> *"Passivity and neutrality are the order of the day. The researcher's 'self' is kept firmly hidden beneath a cloak of cordiality and receptiveness to the words of the interviewee....to get the interviewee to open up, not to provoke hostility or put the interviewee on the defensive."* *Denscombe (1998:117)*

This assumes a restrictive interpretation, where the interviewee's responses are viewed as having a pre-formed, pure informational character that the interviewer's behaviour can somehow contaminate. Such interviewer bias is only meaningful within this narrow interpretative view of responses.

My approach challenges the use of passivity and neutrality as a means of getting the interviewee to 'open up'. I view interviewees' responses as products of an interpretative practice that is in part, reliant on the interaction between the interview participants. My ability to engage with the world of the interviewee is central to the collection of valid and reliable data since it is the very nature of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee that facilitates this open discussion between them. It was therefore important to me to reject the neutral, passive stance and be present as one's real self. Tutteman (2003:21) argues for a collaborative approach describing it as "reasonable and legitimate for the participants to expect some form of exchange for their service to the research, [where] it becomes a matter of negotiating the positions from the outset."

A further criticism of the use of passivity within the interview is that the interviewee can easily misinterpret it as disinterest on the part of the interviewer towards the

respondent which may itself interfere with the establishment of rapport between the parties. Tutteman finds that establishing rapport is "advantageous in most qualitative studies" (2003:7) but concealing oneself behind a professional veneer may prevent the connection of the interviewer and interviewee at a genuine level as the interviewer's façade may be construed as an attempt to manipulate the interviewee. Using such manipulation may make it difficult to envisage how an open and honest relationship -crucial to an effective interview - can be constructed. As such, interviewing real people about real issues may demand that the interviewer too is 'real'.

Trust facilitates an open and honest exchange within the interview, where the climate fosters greater honesty. In a research arena where truth (albeit the subjective truth in many cases) is the cornerstone of reliable data the interviewing approach may crucially provide reliability to the collected data. A person-centred approach may free the interviewer from attempting to manipulate or deceive the interviewee and help to build a climate of trust. It offers a transparency that through congruency may encourage the interviewee to be open, honest and to reveal themselves.

Another tenet of the conventional interviewing approach is that of the interviewer being neutral in their interactions with the interviewee. Brenner (1985) warns interviewers against displaying signs of approval or disapproval, which may bias the respondents' answers to questions. This view is supported by Millar, Crute and Hargie (1992) who hold that the interviewer is required to maintain a distance from the respondents in order to ensure the objective and unbiased collection of data. Within this framework, interviewer neutrality is seen as central to the integrity of the data collected.

However, Oakley (1979), who adopts a feminist approach to interviewing, refutes such disengagement in the interviewing process on the grounds that it is both unreasonable to engage in such an exploitative relationship since it prevents genuine reciprocation of information. Oakley therefore advocates that it is engagement, not disengagement that is required and suggests that disengagement is merely a feature of a masculine paradigm that aims to control the interview situation.

Holstein and Gubrium (1995) also argue that treating interviewing as a social encounter leads us to the possibility that the interview is not merely a neutral conduit or source of distortion but rather the productive site of reportable knowledge itself.

Moreover, the conventional view of the interviewer as a disinterested catalyst seems at odds with the interviewing objective of collecting meaningful data. Interviewers using such an approach are instructed to "...merely soak up information like a sponge, without giving anything back." (Backstrom and Hursh 1995:113)

Taking the stance of the disinterested catalyst is at odds with the person-centred perspective. To begin, neutrality is a very abnormal mode of behaviour to adopt, in terms of discursive human interaction. This may be confusing for the respondent and serve to undermine their confidence in the interviewing process, narrowing the channels of communications. A person-centred approach recognises that being real, being present, reacting and supporting the interviewee in their search for self-understanding and self-explanation of feelings, emotions and behaviour is central to valid data collection. Often an interview probes the edge of an interviewee's awareness – the half-remembered, half-understood, and not-thought-through aspects are sought out. Douglas (1995) recognises that everyone is partially ignorant about his/her situation yet is unaware of this and so may believe something that is not true. This may suggest a need for the interviewee first to discover the truth about themself before being able to communicate this truth to others. There are very subtle nuances involved in self-understanding. It can be extremely difficult for the interviewee to grasp and communicate those thoughts – yet the conventional approach expects the interviewee to do so without any assistance from a neutral interviewer. In contrast to this the person-centred approach that I used places some responsibility for the interviewee's search for self-understanding on the shoulders of the interviewer. The principal tool for achieving this is unconditional positive regard (UPR). UPR offers active acceptance of whatever the respondent says. That is not to say that as the interviewer I gave agreement to what the interviewee says as being 'right', but simply that I gave acceptance to what the interviewee said. Their responses are therefore legitimised as the way that they feel about an issue at that moment. This may help to bridge the distance between the interviewer and the interviewee, not by putting words

in the mouth of the interviewee, but by facilitating the interviewee in developing their own words. In this way the potential distortion of the interviewee's responses caused by interviewer neutrality and passivity could be avoided.

Whilst I was not attempting to be neutral within the interview, I did attempt to be neutral or non-directive in terms of the interviewees' responses. In this way I tried to achieve what Patton (1990) describes as 'empathic neutrality'. Patton outlines this approach as follows:

> "Empathy...is a stance towards the people one encounters, while neutrality is a stance towards the findings. Neutrality [in this sense] can actually facilitate rapport and help build a relationship that supports empathy by disciplining the researcher to be non-judgemental and open. Empathy communicates interest in and caring about people, while neutrality means being non-judgemental about what people say and do during the data collection." (1990:58)

Using a person-centred way of interviewing allowed me to offer an empathic, personal involvement and an understanding of the role of friendly feelings and intimacy to optimise co-operative mutual disclosure and a creative search for mutual understanding. From within this perspective the interview climate and both the experience of being interviewed and of interviewing may be significantly different.

2 Exposing the Power Principle

Interviews are a form of human interaction where one person – the interviewee – is the subject of inquiry by the other – the interviewer. This places the interviewee at an obvious disadvantage, in that the interviewer is in a position of power due to the uneven distribution of rights and obligations between the parties. This imbalance is exacerbated by the disparity of disclosure rights, which if not addressed, may give the interview rapport a disingenuous character.

Using a person-centred approach, that encompasses the use of self-disclosure where appropriate, may restore some balance to the flow of disclosure and establish an

authentic and meaningful rapport. This reflects the view that in order to build a framework of trust that encourages disclosure, the interview needs to be based on reciprocity. Such interviewer self-disclosure, which provides personal information to the interviewee is discouraged within the conventional view of interviewing to avoid a possible source of bias.

However, within my interviews I recognised the importance of developing meaningful rapport as vital in my study where individuals were invited to explore and reveal aspects of themselves in relation to their learning that may be very personal. By using a person centred approach, I strove to foster a close interaction between myself and the participants which, although time consuming, was rewarding in becoming what Siegel (1988:30) describes as the "privileged listener." This is how I saw my role within the interviews. My readiness to disclose my motives for doing the study and to disclose aspects of my own experience may have helped to generate trust.

A further aspect of this self-disclosure in terms of building relationships of trust was my insider status – having withdrawn from two UK universities myself and studying for a third time as a mature student with young children. In common with Douglas (1995) and Daly (1992) I was aware that my personal experience could predispose me to bias and preconceptions. However, whilst this may be viewed as a form of interviewer bias, in common with others including Daly (1992) who found that his insider status was an advantage in his study of adoptive parents, I found my personal experience allowed me to develop a congruence with the interviewees. In contrast, it does not appear very likely to me that someone with no experience of leaving higher education, or of being a non-traditional student within higher education would be better placed to produce unbiased findings.

Using self-disclosure did, at times, blur the perception by interviewees as strictly that of an interviewer. Occasionally, as also found by Daly (1992) students did confuse my role as a researcher with that of a study counsellor. When this occurred my response was to provide information and support within the interview, but to a larger extent suggest a later referral to discuss issues outside of the scope of my study. As such there were times when I found myself stepping out of my role as a researcher

and into that of student counsellor. However, I was careful to delineate the limits of my expertise and to offer resources as described by Hutchinson and Wilson (1994) and Patton (1992).

I also used periods of unfocussed chat and gave time to digressions by participants during the interview (which often produced some interesting insights into their experiences) during the interview in order to establish trust and rapport.

I was not particularly concerned about the often advised need to make interviewees feel relaxed in the interview, which implies that such a relaxed state is the optimal emotional condition for an interviewee to be in. This is presumably linked to the validity of the data collected, in terms of it being more open, and truthful. However, there is little empirical evidence to support such a belief. Perhaps what motivates the interviewer to pursue a relaxed interviewee is their own desire to feel less tense, threatened, and emotionally vulnerable and more in control of both the interview and the interviewee. This search for emotional safety is the interviewer's agenda and may only serve to shift the balance of power within the interview further towards the interviewer. My person-centred approach was based on the belief that the interviewee's emotional state is not only an important source of information about that person in its own right, but also that it demonstrates an individual's emotional context allowing a deeper understanding of that individual's subjective reality. Because my study is inextricably linked to emotions, I felt that it was vital to avoid such overt manipulation of the interviewee's emotional state, and merely allow the interviewee to 'be' – to have control over their emotional condition – in order to express themselves within this 'raw' state. It is my view that this also assists the balance of power between the interviewer and interviewee since the interview is undertaken on the interviewee's emotional terms which may facilitate a deeper understanding of the interviewee's perspective.

In addition to issues related to power balance, using a person centred approach (which places emotion at the centre of an individual's being – viewing it as an integral part of the human experience since all life is experienced subjectively as emotion) I was able to prioritise an emotional focus within the interviews. When studying past experiences through interviews one is largely studying the things that have aroused an

individual emotionally. By concentrating firstly on emotions – accepting, encouraging and exploring them within the interview – it may enhance the process of understanding another.

Such a 'feelings' orientation has the potential to have a profound effect on the interview in terms of:

- the focus of the interview
- the nature of the questions and prompts used by an interviewer
- the responses given by an interviewee
- the depth of exploration of responses.

A brief example may help to illustrate these effects:

Example 1: Semi-Structured Interview Extracts

The following are extracts from two semi-structured interviews undertaken with the same undergraduate student, 2 days apart, in order to explore the reasons for failure on a module(s) of an undergraduate finance programme of study. The interviewer is denoted (Q) and the student is denoted (A).

The traditional approach focuses on thoughts as its source of explanations – using thinking orientated questions to extract such explanations. Follow-up questions are used to explore or clarify responses.

Q Why do you think you failed module X?
A Because I didn't do enough work.
Q How much work did you do?
A Not much, I only started revising about a week before the exam and I ran out of time.
Q Aside from not doing enough work, are there any other reasons you can think of why you failed this module?
A I found the subject boring, so I didn't attend many of the classes.
Q When did you stop attending?

A After about the end of week 6.

Q Is there anything else that you think contributed to you failing module X?

A No I don't think so.

The person-centred approach focuses on feelings rather than thoughts as its primary source of understanding the interviewee. Feelings orientated questions are used to explore the issues. Reflection is used, as a substitute for follow-up questions, to explore or clarify responses.

Q How did you feel about failing module X?

A I felt pretty bad about it. I wasn't surprised - I knew I was going to fail because I didn't do enough work.

Q You didn't do enough work .....

A No, I hardly did any – I just couldn't motivate myself.

Q You lost your motivation .....

A I don't think I ever had any! I never really got started....(pause)....I found it hard to make friends when I got here - everyone else in the class seemed to know each other.....it felt easier just to stop coming.

Q How did you feel when you stopped coming?

A Relieved! I didn't really want to come in the first place

Q You didn't want to be here.....

A No, my parents wanted me to be here!

Using the traditional approach the interviewer could reasonably conclude that the reasons for this student failing the module were:

a) Lack of study effort and examination revision
b) Being bored by the subject
c) Non-attendance at classes

Using the person-centred approach the above 'reasons' are interpreted as the behaviour signals that are symptomatic of the deeper reasons for failure, which are seen to be:

a) Lack of personal commitment to the course – "I didn't really want to come in the first place". This results in the lack of study effort and examination revision.
b) Loss or absence of motivation – "I just couldn't motivate myself". This results in being bored by the subject.
c) Difficulty in establishing relationships with others on the course – "I found it hard to make friends". This results in the non-attendance at classes.

Despite the limitations of such a simplified extract (in terms of brevity, loss of all spoken emphasis/intonation and loss of all non-verbal communication) it may illustrate that asking emotionally-focussed questions (such as those used in my interviews) elicit different and arguably deeper responses.

One of the key features of my interview approach was the use of reflection. Reflective techniques are well established as useful tools in the interviewing armoury. However, within my approach I concentrated reflection (seeking clarification and elaboration of responses) on the emotional content of both the verbal and the non-verbal communication, rather than hollowly repeating back to the respondent whatever it was they had said. I found this to be a powerful mechanism for checking my understanding of students' emotional as well as verbal descriptions. Working together to establish this emotional understanding not only deepened the exploration (since it forced students to really consider their feelings and describe their subjective meaning) but was also a way of conveying empathic understanding to the interviewee. In this way I became focused on facilitating students' personal and subjective search for meaning, allowing them to interpret their own meaning to me rather than imposing my external and second-hand interpretation of what was being said. They were encouraged to respond more on their own terms. This process may therefore protect the integrity of the subjective meaning of the interviewee and as such collect data that more closely encapsulates the true essence of the interviewee's experience. Moreover, interviewees can only explain that part of themselves that they understand and that they choose and feel safe to reveal. Both self-understanding and deep exploration are embedded within a person-centred approach and as such using this approach may increase the depth and richness of data.

In addition this approach may also limit researcher bias, since the focus of the interview remained on the participant. It also appeared to have positive benefits for the interviewee who at times began to articulate this sense of being 'really understood'. These effects are also self-reinforcing since when one feels understood at a deep level it encourages self-disclosure.

3 Ethical Considerations

The interview does not take place in an experimental vacuum. It is not an isolated event, but rather, takes place between 'real' people in the context of their everyday lives and experiences, to which they return.

However, the interview can be a stressful experience for both the interviewee and the interviewer. As such I, like Brannen (1998), felt that I had responsibilities towards the respondent not only in terms of protecting the confidences disclosed but also in managing the emotions that may be aroused or expressed (Brannen 1988). The person-centred approach avoids a one-way dialogue – a questions and answers affair – and as described above uses empathy to support a two-way dialogue with participants. Such a humanistic approach may protect participants from some of the stress intrinsic during an interview, by viewing them as something beyond repositories of responses, that recognises their humanity and may provide a more ethically sound basis of interviewing.

The stress induced by interviewing respondents is exacerbated if sensitive, difficult or emotional issues are exposed. The issues of stress and emotions and the ways of dealing with them may often be ignored within the interviewing process. This can expose both the interviewer and the interviewee to unnecessary levels of stress in terms of dealing with distressing, unpleasant or difficult emotions and in terms of keeping confidences, which in turn compromises ethical standards.

What is interesting is that even counsellors – who are professional confidants – have their own confessors, in terms of having adequate supervision during which counsellors can share their difficulties and seek guidance and support.

In addition, interviewers who are concerned with collecting personal data, particularly that of an emotional or feelings orientation may require more detailed training and preparation since a lack of self-understanding is detrimental to one's ability to understand others. Succeeding generations of counsellors, especially those of the psychoanalytic perspective require interviewers to undergo intensive psychotherapy themselves to uncover emotional conflicts and promote self-understanding. Without such expertise and training potentially self-deceitful projections of their own repressions may lead to a misunderstanding and misinterpretation of their patients. Douglas holds that:

> "...unfortunately most social scientists and other interviewers rarely even recognise this problem and routinely fall victim to it. As a general rule no-one should be an explorer of human beings unless he can face painful self-discoveries, unless he has already undertaken a great deal of self-exploration and exploration of others who have shared the joy and anguish of the endless search for mutual understanding of all human beings." (1995:39-40)

In addition he states that:

> "In general the more of a listener the interviewer is the more sensitive the more openly intimate the more sincerely interested in and warmly caring about the other person, the more he can temporarily surrender to the experience and soul of the other person the more successful he will be as a creative interviewer." (1995:57-58)

What emerges from such literature as necessary are appropriately trained and developed interviewers who can adequately support the interviewee as well as extract data from them. Being a professionally qualified and active student counsellor for the past 12 years, who regularly undertakes continuing professional development within the area I felt adequately trained and developed to undertake a psychotherapeutic approach within my interviews.

To summarise, the main areas of impact created by using a person-centred approach within the interviews are suggested to be as follows:

- The interview focus was on feelings rather than thoughts.
- The interview climate was characterised by empathic understanding and active acceptance, where as the interviewer I attempted to be genuine and real rather fostering a climate of neutrality and passivity.
- The experience of being interviewed focuses on the interviewees feeling understood and validated as opposed to feeling like an object that is being studied and recorded.
- The experience of interviewing strove to engage the participant, where as the interviewer I encouraged them to be their real self by using self-disclosure where appropriate which is in sharp contrast to the disinterested catalyst, who conceals the self behind a professional façade.
- The interview techniques used UPR, empathy, a non-judgemental disposition and reflection aimed at building trust rather than keeping a professional distance.
- The interview process became a social interaction that facilitated interviewees in communicating their experience, rather than being an exercise in information extraction.

The first set of semi-structured interviews within my research took place at the beginning of the personal development course during October 2000 and the second series of interviews with the same students were conducted on completion of the personal development programme in March 2001. Undertaking two sets of interviews with the same students, set 6 months apart, allowed me to gain an insight into the evolution of them as learners. Both sets of interviews were undertaken individually with each of the 11 students who undertook the personal-development course and the random sample of 11 students from the remainder of the same cohort. Each interview lasted approximately 75 minutes on average and designed with respect to my research questions, to focus on students' feelings, attitudes, dispositions towards and experiences of higher education.

During the interviews I did not 'force' the conversation, but attempted to let the participant set their own pace and finish their train of thought. I encouraged them to reflect on their higher education experience and their learning and describe it in their own way, through the use of open-ended questions and reflective techniques.

I undertook all the interviews, in the same room within the same week(s) of the academic year(s) and tape-recording each in their entirety, after securing the individual permission of each participant. This allowed complete data capture – in terms of the verbal discourse and therefore allowed complete transcription of the data at a later stage.

In addition to this data, I also made hand-written notes and observations of the students during the interviews, which allowed a further layer of self-data to be captured for later analysis. It is to this final aspect of data analysis that this chapter now turns.

I began the data analysis by listening repeatedly to the interview audiotapes, and producing an exact transcript of these interviews. Although extremely time consuming, as a first stage of data analysis it was crucial in allowing me to become intimately aware of the data at this early stage. I progressed through a series of careful readings of the transcripts immersing myself within the data and beginning to analyse its content by annotating each issue raised within the margin, and colour-coding emerging themes and patterns. Common, linked or indeed contrasting and conflicting issues and themes, that illustrated the commonalities as well as the peculiarities, were identified to facilitate further unpacking and sorting of the data. Miles and Huberman (1994) describe qualitative analysis as involving 3 activities: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. They view the coding process as a central element of data reduction which involves "attaching meaningful labels to data chunks" (1994:89).

Initially my codes developed as logical extensions from the interview questions, which I modified extensively as data emerged during the ensuing analysis. Generally I adopted Miles and Huberman's *op cit* suggested sequence for abstracting key themes within my coding approach which began with first-level coding, then proceeded to

second-level or pattern coding from which I progressed to derive more general themes. Viewing the data from within organised themes allowed me to begin making interpretive sense and build explanations and arguments. These techniques, drawn from 'template analysis' (Crabtree and Miller 1992) form an analytical method that is "...widely used in qualitative research and is more flexible than many other analytical tools" (King 1998: 118-119). I felt that using such a coding or classifying approach allowed me to more thoroughly analyse the data without compromising the integrity of the students' voices and still capturing their meaning within the data. In this way I was "inferring from the words being examined what is significant...or from the repeated use of words or phrases which indicate that a pattern is developing" (Scott 1999:84).

I progressed by examining the classifications to identify relationships or disparities between them and began the process of understanding these connections. I drew on previous knowledge of learning and the higher education field to do this, which enabled me to begin to make explicit the similarities and differences within the patterns of experience to create theoretical constructs which may enable me to make inferences from the latter to other cases in places and time. These inferences are tentative since "the basic problem in the use of case material in theoretical analysis...is the extent to which the analyst is justified in generalising from a single instance of an event which may be – and probably is – unique" (Mitchell 1983:189). The credibility of these inferences arising from the qualitative data analysis was supported by considering them in conjunction with the quantitative data collected from the questionnaires which enabled some triangulation of findings.

I continued this process of interpretive and reflexive readings of the data which Mason suggests involves "...constructing or documenting a version of what you think the data mean or represent, or what you think you can infer from them" (2002:149). This allowed me to read through and perhaps at times beyond the data, but more importantly this approach maintained a person-centred stance throughout the data analysis process that gives primacy to the students' interpretations and understanding and their versions and accounts of how they make sense of their early higher learning experiences. As the researcher, PDP facilitator and interviewer, my role has been

inextricably and inevitably linked to each stage of the research – something required by the person-centred method – and reflexive reading of the data continued this focus.

Conclusions

This chapter has explored my research design and methodology, which involved a discussion of the reasons underlying the selection of a largely qualitative approach as suited to the study of subjective experiences. The use of quantitative techniques within my broader qualitative framework were also discussed in terms of providing methodological triangulation that may give some credibility to any inferences drawn from the qualitative data analysis. Detailed features of my research design including the use of case studies and semi-structured interviews, undertaken from a person-centred perspective, were also considered.

The next chapter moves on to discuss the findings of my research, specifically the impact of the personal development model on the experiences of students in relation to their transition into the university environment, their learning development and their orientation towards remaining or withdrawing from higher education.

Chapter 6

Results Analysis and Discussion of Findings

This chapter collates and discusses the findings of my research, which are based on the primary data collected throughout the research process consisting of:

- Recorded and transcribed person-centred interviews conducted with all students taking part in the research programme and an equal number of randomly selected students from within the same cohort who did not participate in the personal development programme. Full details of the nature and process of these interviews have been discussed in chapter 5.
- Journal data recorded by myself throughout the period of the research.
- Questionnaire data derived from the self-evaluation questionnaire issued to all students within the cohort during the first week (before the personal development programme commenced) and last week (after completion of the personal development programme) of their first year of study.

The discussion of my findings is in relation to my research questions which are stated in Chapter 1 and restated here:

1. How can a structured programme of emotional and personal development that draws on person-centred psychotherapy principles be integrated into contemporary higher education?

2. What is the impact of such a programme on the experiences of non-traditional students in relation to their transition into university, their attitudes to learning and their orientations towards remaining or withdrawing from higher education?

The first of these research questions centres on the need for, and role of emotions and personal development in contemporary higher education. These aspects have been explored in detail in earlier Chapters 2 and 4. In Chapter 2, I presented a case for the role of emotion in higher education, particularly in relation to the needs of non-

traditional students. The focus of the first research question also encompasses how emotions and personal development can be practically integrated into a programme of higher education in a way that is consistent with both the ethos and aims of higher education and learning, and appropriate to the needs of current students. Again, the resolution of these practical concerns and the development of my personal development programme, as one potential vehicle for integrating emotional and personal development into higher education, are discussed in Chapter 4 of this research.

As such the emotional foundation, person-centred philosophy, structure, development and some aspects of the implementation of the programme of emotional and personal development used within my research are considered in earlier chapters. This chapter therefore attends to the second research question above - the impact of the personal development programme on students' experiences of transition, higher learning and retention. These discussions make extensive use of the interview data collected from students to more fully allow students and their experiences to speak for themselves and in so doing aims to remain faithful to representing the realities of those students. In addition data from my personal self-reflective journal is used to narrate, explain, link and make sense of the student experiential data and provide an additional perspective useful in terms of evaluating the development programme. Data derived from the questionnaires is used to triangulate and contextualise inferences that are drawn from the interview data.

Throughout this chapter, extracts from the interview transcripts are reproduced. Although these are a verbatim record of the interaction, it does not include references to non-verbal behaviours. Short pauses in speech are indicated as (...). Words and phrases emphasised by the speaker are underlined. Punctuation has been added - in a way which I hope is faithful to the delivery of the dialogue - to make the text more readily intelligible to the reader. Writers, including Silverman (2001) and Seale (1999) suggest that using verbatim quotes strengthens the reliability of qualitative studies since it involves "recording observations in terms that are as concrete as possible, including verbatim accounts of what people say, for example, rather than researchers' reconstructions" (1999:148). Vidovich too, suggests that "by including extensive respondent quotes in the reporting of data, the reader is able to judge the

effectiveness with which the artificially contrived categories represent the raw data" (2003: 90).

I was keen to allow the data to 'speak for itself' in a way that reliably captures the richness of the students' descriptions, however, Mehan cautions that this can give qualitative research an anecdotal quality if it merely includes "a few exemplary instances of the behaviour that the researcher has culled from field notes" (1979:15). Fielding and Fielding (1986) also warn authors against selecting data "to fit an ideal conception (preconception) of the phenomenon...[or] which are conspicuous because they are exotic, at the expense of the less dramatic (but possibly indicative) data" (1986:32). There is therefore a need to address the rationale for including particular quotes and excluding others if findings are to have credibility. I followed Silverman's suggestions on achieving this by "using standardised methods...to prepare transcripts" (2001:231) making "every effort to falsify our initial assumptions about our data" (2001:224), using "low inference descriptors" (2001:229) that work within a framework of what Hammersley (1992: 50-51) calls a 'subtle form of realism' where: "Validity is identified with confidence in our knowledge but not certainty of its truth. Reality is assumed to be independent of the claims that researchers make about it...[and] always viewed through particular perspectives. Hence our accounts *represent* reality; they do *not* reproduce it." As such the selection of quotes was driven by the emerging themes identified in the data analysis as indicative of areas of commonality and uniqueness within the experiences of students.

By following these guidelines I attempted to make my data collection and analysis more reliable and valid. In addition, each interview transcript was taken back to the individual concerned prior to any data analysis in order that they could verify the content of it as an accurate representation of the encounter. Writers, including Reason and Rowan (1981) and Silverman (2001:233) suggest that such "respondent validity" allow researchers to be more confident of the validity of their data.

The discussion of my findings focuses on the students' perceptions and experiences of transition, learning and retention and includes their experiences both before and after the personal development programme has taken place. Data illustrating the 'before' position is drawn from the first series of interviews with participating students and the

sample of non-participating students and highlights areas of similarity and difference between the accounts of non-traditional and traditional students. Data demonstrating the 'after' position is drawn from the second series of interviews with the same participating and non-participating students and again highlights areas of interest, similarity and difference between the two groups. To protect students' anonymity and to allow the reader to distinguish between participating and non-participating students dialogue, participating students are coded P1 to P11 (see Appendix 3 for details of participating students) and non-participating students N1 to N11.

Discussion of Findings

My discussion is structured around the 3 key areas described in my research questions, namely transition, learning development and retention. Each of these is considered in turn in the section that follows. In addition an overview of the categories used to structure the discussion is provided in Appendix 4.

1. Starting out on the higher learning journey – the process of transition.

The earlier literature (see Smith 2002 and Moxley *et al* 2001) indicates that transition is a complex change process during which students adapt and become accustomed to the higher education environment and its requirements. This represents a period of student adaptation occurs across a variety of areas including practical, social, cultural, intellectual, personal and emotional aspects. In common with other change experiences, this period of transition has the potential to be a stressful and demanding time for students as they come to terms with the 'culture shock' (BBC:1999) of arriving at university.

Initial perceptions and managing change

The early interviews reveal that there are a number of common perceptions of the process of transition shared by students. Regardless of their background, students express initial uncertainties that stem from the 'newness' of being at university. Many comment initially on orientation issues;

"I spend a lot of my time trying to find which room my classes are in." N7

"The campus feels very big and confusing...I keep having to ask for directions to my next class." P4

Uncertainties also extend to being amongst unfamiliar people with a mixture of feelings and perceptions being expressed:

"I don't know anyone else in my class yet. It's sort of exciting being with lots of new students." P9

"It feels very strange being in a classroom full of people you don't know. You have to do a lot of small-talk to try to get to know people. It's quite stressful at times." N11

Students also express initial unfamiliarity with the systems used within the university:

"I haven't quite got the hang of the library system yet. We've had the guided tour, but it was like information overload and I didn't take it all in!" P2

"I feel a bit unsure about computers. I'm learning, but I get stuck and have to ask one of the other students or the technician to help me." N3

"There are so many different tutors here...academic tutors, personal tutors, year tutors, scheme leaders...I don't know who any of them are, what they do, where I can find them, or what I need them for!" N6

Whilst these early uncertainties, arising from unfamiliar people, environments and systems, are very real for students, most are easily overcome merely by virtue of time passing and students gaining necessary familiarity or via the provision of adequate information in the form of campus maps, information sheets, guidance notes and explanations. As such they represent what might be described as cognitive transition issues that respond well to the receipt and satisfactory assimilation of factual

information and experiences. However, other transition issues experienced by students appear to arise from, or cause emotional responses. Responses to the interview question: - "So...being at university, what is that like for you?" - elicited the following range of responses:

> "I can't wait to get started. I never thought I'd make it here and I want to make the most of every second! I haven't been able to sleep for about a week I'm so excited!" P7

> "Coming to university has always been an ambition for me, so I'm really happy about being here and especially getting into the social side of things." N10

> "It's OK, but I don't like feeling like a stranger and not knowing anyone else properly yet." N2

> "I've got mixed feelings about the whole thing. Some days it's fine and other days I hate it. I'm hoping that I'll settle in eventually." P1

> "I miss my family and my friends back home. I spend most of my free time in my room emailing my friends back home...if I'm honest, I want to go home." N8

> "It's not what I thought it was going to be like. I'm on my own all the time...I haven't really made any friends...it's getting me down. I got very upset on the phone to my mum last night...she keeps telling me that it'll get better, but I can't see how at the moment." P6

Early feelings range from excitement to desperation and provide some insight into students' experience of transition as beyond cognitive issues. Responses are littered with emotional language and feelings descriptors (e.g. excited, happy, feeling like a stranger, hate, upset) suggesting that transition is *felt* as much as *known* by students - i.e. is an emotional process as well as a cognitive one.

Further reflections amongst non-traditional students on early university life reveal the range, depth and immediacy of these emotional aspects of transition:

> "When the day came for me to attend university for the first time I felt sick! I had convinced myself that I was going to hate it – who was I trying to kid at 35 years of age coming to university! I very nearly talked myself out of the whole idea on the bus ride to the campus!" P8

> "As the start of university came closer I remembered how I used to feel when we did exams in school. I'd get really nervous and never did very well. I started to think that university was going to be like one big long examination! My stomach's churning over just thinking about it." P11

> "I'm not sure about being here, it might be a mistake...the worst of it is that I can't bring myself to tell my partner how I feel...I've made such a big thing about coming that I can't back out of it now." P9

Most universities recognise the importance of facilitating student transition and many respond by providing induction programmes and tutoring systems. The earlier literature in this area recognises and is critical of many traditional induction programmes for being inappropriate to the needs of many current students. Students within my research mirror this finding and almost universally perceived the inadequacy of the induction programme they experienced in terms of its inability to meet their needs:

> "There's plenty of advice and information on all the practical things – like maps to get around, accommodation services and banking advice – but when it comes to all the personal stuff, about how you actually feel – there isn't anyone to talk to that about." N3

> "It made things worse! Everything comes all at once – all the leaflets, one person after another giving us talks on everything from timetables, to money and clubs. It's too much all at once." P8

What students appear to be saying is that traditional induction programmes focus on the cognitive aspects of transitional and fail to address the personal dimension. One particularly perceptive comment succinctly illustrates the perception that induction was a mechanical process which focused on meeting the needs of the institution rather than the complex needs of the students:

> "I feel anxious most of the time. Induction didn't really help, because it wasn't about me, it was about the university and it's way of managing me." P5

Ironically, the student support system, whose raison d'être is to assist students, is a further cause of initial concern for many students:

> "I had a letter from my academic counsellor to say I have to go and talk to him next week. I don't want to go...If I needed help I'd ask for it. I hope he doesn't make me lie down on his couch or anything weird like that!" P7

> "My personal tutor is the most unapproachable person I've ever met. If I needed any help, he is the last person I would go to!" N5

Many students described the burden of not having any personal support or help with dealing with their feelings:

> "I feel quite unhappy most of the time...but I keep it all in because there's non-one to talk to about it." N11

> "It's a strain trying to pretend that everything is OK. On the surface I look fine, but underneath I'm struggling." P10

Students appear to be struggling with finding appropriate support that meets their emotional needs which is consistent with the calls for 'better' student support within the literature (see Adler *et al* 2000; Rawson 2001; Cotton 1995 and Ottewill 2002).

Ways of managing, understanding and coping with the emotional aspects of transition are largely omitted from induction programmes which tend to focus on information

and facts. This may be a significant deficit given Yorke's (1999) findings that students frequently relate their withdrawal to 'emotional difficulties with others' and 'a lack of personal support' and that such withdrawal is primarily concentrated in the first few weeks of the first term of study. Within my personal development programme I sought to approach transition in a more realistic way, seeking to recognise all aspects (especially the emotional) as experienced by students. By giving primacy to the affective realm students were encouraged to share, understand and manage their feelings in a supportive environment. The literature understands that affect impacts on all aspects of an individual's life including learning (Gracia and Jenkins 2002). By addressing these emotional and personal issues I sought to assist students with these experiences and more effectively manage their feelings and transition. Students appeared to respond favourably to this personal and emotional approach:

> "Having somewhere to go to talk about how I felt made things much easier. I didn't feel so on my own. It made the settling in thing a lot easier." P1

> "Talking helped me to understand my feelings, but listening to others made me realise that we were all in the same position. It gave me a lot of reassurance to know that I was just like everyone else." P6

> "I got so much support from the group...they helped me realise that what I was feeling was totally normal...just a stage that I had to go through." P10

These comments contrast to those made by a number of non-participating students:

> "I don't think I got off to the best start...I was quite negative about being here and I got sort of stuck in a negative rut. I haven't made many friends and all I'm really doing is going through the motions of studying." N1

> "It took me a long time to get into being here. It's a different mindset – you have to be very organised and do stuff on your own. I haven't fully made that change yet and I'm behind in a lot of my classes." N7

The development programme, by providing a forum in which students could share their feelings (i.e. focusing on 'psychosocial' development, Chickering *et al* 1993), may support students in managing the emotional aspects of transition, in a way that goes beyond what the non-participating student above describes as just "going through the motions." One aspect of this appears to be the normalisation of negative feelings – as students, through sharing their feelings come to realise that these feelings are both valid and a common experience for many others. Such realisation appears to break down feelings of isolation or 'alienation' suggested as beneficial by Gibbs (2001), conditions which persisted for some non-participating students.

The impact of family attitudes

In today's society, with so much emphasis being placed on the merits and apparent availability of education it would be easy to assume that the families of students undertaking it would feel favourably towards that decision to study. However, somewhat surprisingly the accounts of non-traditional students reveal a range of family and social 'barriers' to transition:

> "My mother keeps telling me that I'm not up to studying at university and that I'm getting ideas above my station. It's hard to listen to...we argue a lot...but it's made me more determined than ever." P2

> "When I told my partner that I was thinking about coming to university he told me that I needed to be careful, because university wasn't for people like us." P11

> "No-one in my family has ever gone to university, and my parents told me that it was a waste of time. They wanted me to get a job and bring some money into the house rather than keep taking it out for another 3 years!" P5

> "I'd wanted to come to university for the last 6 years, but I knew my parents wouldn't approve. My dad says students are a drain and use university to have

a good time and avoid work! It took me a long time to build up the courage to tell him that I wanted to come." N8

Whilst not a universal feature of non-traditional student experience, oppositional family attitudes or those lacking tacit support for the desire to attend higher education appear frequently in their accounts. This may be a result of the cultural disposition of these individuals' families and the belief that such students are 'unsuitable' for higher education, as described by Webb *et al* (2002). Such family responses are consistent with the findings of Bourdieu (2000) who suggests that individuals develop expectations in relation to the cultural capital they possess which imposes practical limitations on them and their families. The lack of higher education exposure, that is characteristic of non-traditional students, therefore translates into a lack of expectation or even acceptance of higher study amongst families as something that non-traditional students will engage with. Whilst the origin and existence of this opposition may be understood within the literature, what my study reveals is the impact of such opposition on the individual student. Further non-traditional students' perceptions reveal something of these impacts on their longer-term higher learning:

"I was aware that once I'd made this decision to come to college, I was going to have to stick to it no matter what because I just couldn't face the 'I told you so' from my parents if I dropped out and went back home with my tail between my legs." P2

"Because my parents didn't want me to come I knew that when things got tough I wouldn't be able to talk to them about it. That was scary – knowing that I was going to have to cope on my own. It made it feel like a huge step I was taking." P7

These accounts reveal something of the risks and fears that non-traditional students face. The notion of 'risk' in relation to non-traditional students' entry into higher education is described by Reay *et al* (2001). My research builds on this by revealing how this risk is manifested in the individual experience of students, in terms of the isolation and anxiety that ensues.

In contrast, familial opposition is lacking within the accounts of traditional students, who describe a more supportive experience:

> "My family are so proud of me coming to university." N4

> "I know that my family are behind me 100%." N10

> "I get a lot of support from my parents, not just financially...they are always there for me, you know, to talk to and whatever." P10

Interestingly, the family support and encouragement that traditional students experience is not always perceived as a positive thing. Some traditional students interpret this support as pressure to attend university whether they want to or not:

> "I'm here for my parents really. They always wanted me to come to university. I'm not that bothered, but I've done it for them." P4

> "It's always been expected of me that I'd come to university. I never really had much of a choice...I'd have preferred to get a job but my parents would have been too disappointed." P6

The influence of parental and other family member's attitudes appears significant to students regardless of their social background. One student who described himself as coming from 'a typical middle-class background', said:

> "I always felt that I'd disappointed my parents terribly by not choosing to come to university when I was 18. Dad was furious about it. This is my chance to get him back on side and actually do something that he approves of for a change!" P3

Given the apparent importance of family attitudes for students and that many non-traditional students experience negative, isolating attitudes this may render them more vulnerable to the pressures of transition. However, traditional students who feel pressurised into coming to university may also share this vulnerability.

Within the personal development programme, students discussed their responses to perceived familial opposition, with a view to enabling them to more effectively manage this obstacle.

> "When I started here my family gave me a lot of grief about coming. I talked about it in the group and started to accept and understand where they were coming from, but not to let it affect me too much or interfere with my studies." P3

> "Discussing our families helped me to separate out their feelings about me being at university from my own feelings. Keeping things separate stopped their negativity rubbing off on me." P2

For non-traditional students who didn't participate in the personal development programme, feelings in relation to family attitudes seem less effectively managed:

> "Coping with my mother's attitude has been difficult. Every time I complained about anything to do with university I get the 'I told you so'." N9

> "I've stopped talking to my family about university...it's too much hassle. That's quite bad isn't it...it's put a gap between us." N1

In this regard my programme appears to support students to manage family opposition. What seemed to be particularly beneficial here was the unifying experience, a finding shared by Rawson (2000), that small groups lent to the development work. Through sharing and understanding their experiences, students appeared to be assisted in containing some of the potentially adverse impacts of family opposition on their studies.

Sensing loss

During transition students also talked about a sense of 'loss'; loss of their current sense of identity, loss of pre-existing support networks and a moving away from the familiar into a new phase of their lives:

> "I feel lost...not lost in the sense that I can't find my way around, although that happens, but the whole thing is so unfamiliar...the people, the buildings, the subjects...the whole thing really." P2

> "I'm usually quite confident and talkative, but it's quite strange and new at the moment...I'm a lot quieter than I normally am. I'm not sure who I am at the moment." N6

Whilst both traditional and non-traditional students express concern in relation to feeling both physically and emotionally isolated at times, the accounts of non-traditional students appear to raise issues related to their self-perception in terms of 'fitting-in':

> "I feel completely out of my depth." P1

> "I'm not sure that I'll ever fit in." P8

> "I got lost yesterday. I went home rather than walk in late with everyone looking at me...I just gave up for the day." P5

> "It's daunting, being here. Everyone else looks as if they know where they're going, smiling and laughing in groups. I feel very on the outside, you know, detached from everything. Maybe it's not going to be as easy to settle in as I thought." P11

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) suggest that higher education assumes the possession of cultural capital. My results appear to support this since accounts suggest that non-traditional students are aware of their 'lack of fit', within an institution that has arguably been designed and developed to meet the needs of traditional students. This recognition is described by Webb *et al* (2002:24) who also suggest the potentially

detrimental affect of such awareness as non-traditional students "will signal in everything they do and say, their unsuitability for higher education, and as a corollary...will themselves recognise this, and more or less expect failure." My findings concur with these earlier studies on the existence of a 'lack of fit'. However, my results also provide some insight into the influence of feelings of 'lack of fit' on the behaviour of non-traditional students in terms of 'giving up for the day', indicating the behavioural impact of non-traditional students awareness of their lack of 'cultural proximity' (Grenfell *et al* 1998).

In contrast the accounts of traditional students do not mention this lack of fit, but focus more on 'loneliness' and the lost contact with established friends and family:

> "Coming here, I've lost contact with my friends back home. I miss them...I know I have to just get on with it and move on but it's hard." N11

> "It's like starting over again. I do feel lonely...what I want to do is ring up all my old friends...I miss my old life." P4

> "Leaving my friends and family behind was hard. It felt like someone had just taken away my safety net. The nights are worst...sitting in my room wondering how long I'm going to last." N3

Some explanation of these differences may lie in the different characteristics of traditional and non-traditional students. Non-traditional students include older students with many remaining at home whilst studying, therefore maintaining contact with pre-existing friends and family. As such their sense of feeling alone may be lessened. However, traditional students often move away from home for the first time when attending university and hence leave behind established friends and family networks which may make them more susceptible to feelings of loneliness.

Some traditional students, however, express a more positive attitude to settling in:

"I've always had to be a good mixer, so I just go up to people and start up conversations about anything and try and find something we might have in common." N11

"Part of coming to university is about getting to know lots of new people. I think that's half the fun, isn't it? I don't understand these people who stay in their rooms and get all depressed. Why don't they just get out there and make the most of it?" N2

These traditional students reveal a greater positivity towards studying than other traditional students and most of the non-traditional students. Within the early non-traditional student accounts there are only two examples of initial overt optimism:

"I am looking forward to studying and learning...I feel good about my decision to come...it's all the practical things that worry me." P11

"Starting here is exciting! I feel nervous as well but I just want to get going." P7

The underlying desire to 'fit-in' was explored in the personal development sessions:

"When I came here first of all, it was important to me to fit-in – whatever that means – be accepted I guess. The sessions helped me realise that being different is OK...it's more than OK, it's good to have your own identity, think your own thoughts...it's part of getting a degree really, not something to be avoided!" P5

"I don't worry about being part of the crowd anymore. If others like me that's fine, if they don't it doesn't bother me anymore." P10

Whilst some non-participating students were also less concerned with fitting-in at the end of their first year, others did not appear to have developed the same level of comfort with their individuality that participating students had:

"I don't care about not being accepted by other students. I'm getting used to being on my own...I don't particularly like it, but what can I do about it?" N7

"A big part of the reason I left the course was because I didn't feel I belonged." N6

Challenging participating students' desire to 'fit-in' within my programme appears to facilitate students in becoming less concerned about fitting-in and more comfortable with their individuality. This may have been due to exploring the underlying issues or perhaps occurred because participating in and belonging to the group itself had an inclusive influence. Furthermore, 'fitting-in' is a measure of self-perception in relation to others and as such is concerned with self regard. Challenging these self-perceptions within my programme may have reduced what Rogers (1992) termed 'conditions of worth' – i.e. a move away from reliance on the views of others in defining our self-perceptions.

The perception of difference

Early accounts of non-traditional students frequently reveal their understanding of themselves as 'different' to other students and often express this using emotional language:

"The other students are different to me; they look different, act different, they just are different. I'm not this carefree student, out every night, drinking in the union like them because all the time I know that I have two kids to look after and bills to pay. I'm not complaining or anything! It's my choice, but that's just the way it is." P11

"I felt like a fish out of water for the first few weeks...being older than most of the others I stand out as different. I think the younger students are a bit afraid of me and they don't come to talk to me...because of the age thing." P8

"I get a bit resentful of the other students...the proper students, the ones straight from school. They have all this time on their hands to study which most of them waste by staying in bed all day and drinking all night with their mates. I wish I had half their free time – they don't know how lucky they are. They should try working 25 hours a week and then come home and study!" P2

"I hate coming to college. I feel like everyone else knows what's going on and I don't have a clue. I can't use the computers properly, the tutors seem to have taken a dislike to me along with most of the other students and I'm too afraid to even set foot in the library!" P3

What these accounts reveal is that this sense of perceived difference, amongst some non-traditional students during transition, is deep enough to lead some to challenge their sense of personal identity.

"I feel that I'm not really good enough to be here...like I don't deserve it, I'm not up to it somehow." P1

"Sometimes I feel like an imposter! It's strange being here...I haven't told my mates that I'm here yet...I don't want them to think that I think I'm better than them. I don't want them to treat me any differently." P11

Other students, regardless of being traditional or non-traditional students experience some lack of personal belonging as a feature of their early university experience:

"No-one here knows who I am – I'm just a face in the crowd." N4

"I don't feel really known by anyone."P6

Participating students raised these issues within the personal development programme, and used the session to address these perceptions of difference and of not belonging:

"Being part of the development group really made me feel like I belonged...it was more than that...I felt properly understood, I knew the others and they knew me. It's a good feeling." P8

"The group made me feel part of the university...you know, settled here and included. It made me feel like I mattered and that I made a difference to the others." P2

"One of the good things about the group was that it made me feel good about myself and that I was capable of being here and that I had a contribution to make." P10

In my journal I noted how during these particular sessions, students talked about the group providing a safe space within which they could reveal their feelings about being 'different', which at other times they felt were best concealed. This not only appears to further break down feelings of isolation and help them become aware of the 'causes' of these feelings of difference, but also indicates the level of impact that the perception of 'being different' can have on students. These are particularly evident in the accounts of some non-participating students, where feelings of not being known persisted throughout their first year of study:

"I've been here nearly a year, but none of the tutors ever call me by my name. I don't think they even know my name. I'm just 'brown-jumper-four-rows-back' to them! I feel invisible most of the time." N7

"It bothers me that I haven't really made much of a connection to any of the other students." N10

"I think I'd get a lot more out of being here if I'd made a few more friends and felt more a part of the whole thing." N2

These comments indicate some degree of alienation and such alienation may spill over into learning approaches (Mann: 2001). I shall return to this point a little later in the discussion.

Expectations gap

Students enter higher education with some expectation of what the experience will involve. The fit between expectation and reality may be one measure of the extent of transition required. During the early interviews students reveal how their early experiences compared to these expectations. There is some difference between the perceptions of non-traditional and traditional students in this regard. Non-traditional students' comments include:

> "It wasn't what I thought it was going to be like at all. I thought it would be more structured and that the tutors would go through things a lot more." P2

> "I didn't really know what it was going to be like before I came. I had some ideas, but I'm surprised at how few hours I actually have on my timetable though. I thought I would have classes most of the time." P3

> "It seems like you have to do most of the work on your own – it would be better if there were more tutorials so that you can get more support." N11

These findings are perhaps unsurprising given that non-traditional students by their very nature have little or no experience of higher education and also support the view of Hall *et al* (2000:6) that students require help in "becoming more aware of what is required of them." By contrast, the views of some traditional students include:

> "It's pretty-much like I expected it to be. My brother went to uni last year so I've heard a lot about what he gets up to...I'm just carrying on from where he left off!" P4

> "It's not that much different from the sixth-form college I just came from. Not too many timetabled hours, expected to do some work on your own, but a better social life!" N4

> "I thought it would be more interesting, the subject I mean. Studying here is like I thought it would be, but just more boring." N10

Because traditional students have some point of reference their expectations appear more realistic than those of some non-traditional students. Less realistic expectations may result in non-traditional students facing a greater transition gap and bridging a wider gap may be more problematic and take longer.

Through discussions within the development programme, students explored the differences between their expectations and the reality of university life and by sharing ideas and experiences built an understanding of what higher learning actually involved.

> "The most useful part of the development sessions was sharing with the others how we all went about studying. I haven't studied for years so it was useful to listen to what others did. It made me re-think my approach and stop relying so heavily on the tutor and rely more on myself...to be more active I suppose." P2

> "When I started I wasn't really sure how to be a good student...that's definitely something I've improved by being in the group." P7

> "Tutors take it for granted that students know how to study. It's not true! Actually having somewhere to go to discuss how to learn, rather than what to learn was good." P11

Many students appear to begin their higher education experience with some level of uncertainty in relation to what 'studying' practically involves. To compound this situation it seems that the issue of learning – which is central to higher education – is seldom discussed directly with students and moreover there is often an implicit assumption that students intrinsically know what is expected of them within higher learning.

This section has explored students' experiences during the time of transition and these experiences reveal that it involves adjustments beyond the practical and intellectual to include social, personal and emotional changes. The next section focuses on students' learning development.

2. The higher education journey – learning to learn

In chapter 2, I derived a framework for understanding the developmental process of learning-to-learn within higher education which drew upon an eclectic but complementary collection of conceptions and learning theories. This framework demonstrates a continuum - in terms of increasing levels of self-development and personal involvement with learning – along which individuals progress as their ability to learn develops.

Whilst learning conceptions or the level of learner development are not static phenomena, students do arrive at university with an existing conception of learning. The level of its development is, of course, extremely variable amongst individuals but if one aim of my programme is to assess its impact on students' conception of learning it initially seemed important to me to attempt to make some form of quantitative assessment of their opening and closing positions. I undertook these initial and final assessments via a self-evaluation questionnaire (Appendix 1) whose design and implementation are discussed in Chapter 5.

This part of the data analysis compares students' level of learning development prior to the commencement of the programme and again upon its completion. This provides a snapshot of changes in learner development across 2 dimensions. The questionnaire records students' responses to 34 learning statements, each recording aspects of students passive (having – 17 statements) or active (being – 17 statements) learning dispositions, behaviours or orientations.

To recap the 'having' mode of learning is characterised by feelings of alienation from the subject matter being studied, a detachment from the learning which itself occurs at a surface or superficial level, where the learner views learning as knowledge

exchange, and themselves as the passive recipients of the learning product. This contrasts sharply with the 'being' mode of learning where students are actively engaged with and by their learning, where the learning and the learner have no clear boundary, the latter are changed as a result of the deep learning taking place with learners viewing themselves as active participants in a process of learning.

Each statement was scored 1 to 5 based on student responses, giving a maximum 'having' or 'being' score of 85 (17 x 5) in each case. Arguably the most developed scoring pattern would score the lowest marks achievable for 'having' of 17 (17 x 1) and the highest marks achievable for the 'being' disposition of 85. In contrast the pattern would be reversed for students whose learning conception was less developed with a score of 85 against the 'having' rating and 17 against the 'being' rating. The programme sought to enhance learner development and the percentage change in learner disposition over the first year of academic study is also included. Scores were calculated for each student based on their responses and are summarised in the table that follows:

Table 6.1 Learner Development Scores for Students within the Cohort

Student	Opening (BEFORE) having:being score	Closing (AFTER) having:being score	% change in having:being score
P1	67:30	58:38	13%↓:27%↑
P2	50:34	39:31	22%↓: 9%↑
P3	41:25	32:46	22%↓:84%↑
P4	53:27	47:37	11%↓:37%↑
P5	50:36	45:40	10%↓:11%↑
P6	49:39	46:40	6%↓: 3%↑
P7	54:29	44:39	19%↓:34%↑
P8	44:40	28:52	36%↓:30%↑
P9	43:31	41:36	5%↓:16%↑
P10	63:34	49:37	22%↓: 8%↑
P11	39:45	32:46	18%↓: 2%↑
Average for PDP students	**55:37**	**42:40**	**17%↓:24%↑**
Average for remaining students in the cohort	**52:37**	**48:36**	**8%↓: 3%↓**

The results are interpreted with caution and offer a glimpse into self-reported levels of learner development in terms of 'having/being' dispositions. Data used to calculate the opening figures was collected during the first week of the Autumn term (i.e. the first week of students' higher education experience). Opening figures demonstrate similarity between the profile of the students who undertook the programme and those who did not. Both show an identical average rating for 'being' and a very similar score for 'having' with the participant group scoring 3 points higher initially than their counterparts for this proxy measure of passivity. Similarly, both groups begin with significantly higher scores for 'having' in relation to 'being' dispositions, indicating a greater tendency towards passive learning approaches which conceive higher education as knowledge transfer.

However, the closing figures (for which data was collected during the last week of the summer term) demonstrates that participating students experience a larger reduction in levels of self-reported 'having' dispositions and conceptions and a higher level of 'being' conception than their non-participant peers. The average level of reduction in passive-type learning behaviours and tendencies is reported at 17% within the participant group in comparison to just 8% in the remaining cohort. More significant, however, is that the average level of increase in active-type learning behaviours and tendencies is reported at 24% in comparison to a 3% decrease within the remaining cohort. These results may suggest that participating students experience improved learning development in that their conception of learning has changed to include a reduced reliance on passive-type learning behaviours and approaches and includes a greater tendency towards engaged, active higher learning approaches.

However, the tentative conclusion that participating students experienced a greater learner development (in terms of moving their learning conception from the passive or 'having' end of the spectrum to the active or 'being' end) than non-participants is not without its limitations. It is important to understand that the use of a numeric score to determine shifts in human development is not without its shortcomings.

Firstly, it is arguable that human nature is so complex that it is not possible to reduce it to a score or rating. Secondly ascribing a quantitative value to an individual's self-ranked perception may not be an effective means of measuring such attributes.

Similarly it is arguable that comparisons between or aggregating individual's perceptions is inadvisable since each individual is unique, perceiving their reality from the vantage point of their own unique experiences and as such no two individuals use the same perspective. Therefore aggregation or comparison of perceptions is not possible since there is no common base of experience.

Thirdly, the questionnaire as a vehicle for collecting data is limited in that it only collects written data and relies on a student's ability to comprehend and respond to the written statements. Furthermore it relies on self-reported responses and is therefore restricted by an individual's ability to critically reflect upon their attitudes and behaviours. Furthermore participating in the programme, which used reflection, may have enabled participating students to be more competent at reflecting.

Fourthly, discussing learning conception within the programme may have raised participants' awareness of the perceived desirability of the 'being' disposition. Hence when completing the second questionnaire this may have prompted them to self-rate towards this end of the spectrum. As such their scores may be more a reflection of what they perceive as desirable rather than a true reflection of their personal learning conception.

Lastly, the questionnaire collects data at two fixed time points and therefore offers no insight into any changes as they occur over time. Additionally it offers no interpretation of the scores, merely providing a mechanism for measuring the values at discreet points in time, offering quick glimpses of learning development at these fixed points. Given time to reflect on the nature of the data collected in this way and the limitations on its interpretation it appears to me that the analysis and understanding of the intervening periods when the development has taken (or not taken) place is more important. As such the quantitative assessments may at best merely capture a 'snapshot' of any development that has taken place and provide a starting point from which it is possible to consider the nature and causes of the recorded changes. The next section returns to the qualitative interview data to seek insight into the nature and causes of these learner developments.

Learning risk

Most students experience some level of early concern in relation to their ability to study and do well at university. This seemed particularly evident in the accounts of non-traditional students who described the personal risks involved in entering university, including the idea that they were taking a chance on themselves:

> "It's a big risk being here and a lot of money! I've given up a lot to come and it's putting a big strain on my family life...I hope it's going to be worth it." P5

> "I'm not really sure if I'm up to studying here...I'm taking a chance...I keep feeling that someone will find me out and realise that I shouldn't really be here." P8

I began to discuss this notion of risk – especially for non-traditional students – earlier, in relation to family opposition and issues relating to transition. The perception of risk however, appears to persist beyond the early weeks and again my results shed some light onto how the perception of risk manifests itself through students responses and approaches to their learning. One aspect of this appears to be revealed in the frequency with which non-traditional students describe 'minor' learning obstacles as a source of disproportionate anxiety:

> "I get so worked up about small things, you know...one tutor asked us to do a literature search for a piece of tutorial work. I remember thinking what is that?! I didn't want to ask because it would have made me feel even more stupid than I was feeling already!" P2

> "I can't bring myself to go into the library at all! I feel overwhelmed by the whole place. I haven't got a clue how to go about finding anything in there and there never seems to be anyone friendly looking to ask." P3

Whilst linked to perceptions of risk, these responses may also stem from a lack of confidence held by non-traditional students in relation to their learning approach, which writers including Cannon (2002), Snell (1998) and Mace (1977) suggest

undermine learning. Despite the strength of some students concerns they expressed a reluctance to raise these types of issues with tutors and one student's comment offers some insight into this:

> "Tutors presume you know how to do all these things. It's like as if they think that if you don't know how to do them, you shouldn't be here. At first you're afraid to ask because you don't want to look stupid...and as time goes on you pass the point where it's OK to ask...it's a no-win situation." P11

This misplaced assumption amongst some tutors and the higher education system generally (reflected in both the individual and institutional habitus) that students have a baseline learning ability may place students – particularly non-traditional students - at a learning disadvantage.

Within the programme participating students were able to explore their uncertainties:

> "It was a relief to have somewhere to go where it was OK to ask the questions you were afraid to ask in tutorials." P4

> "I had been struggling with the academic language that tutors use to confuse us! I raised it in the group and was amazed to find that just about everyone else was having the same problems. We started translating the academic words into plain English that we could all understand. Sharing our problems and working them out together was good because we did it together, out in the open without anyone being made to feel stupid."P7

Raising these issues allowed students a constructive outlet for their concerns. Moreover, as also found by Brookfield (1999), discovering that problems were shared by others also seemed to break-down feelings of isolation and encouraged students to open-up. By leading discussions and working together to resolve issues, students were not only helping themselves to better understand the technical aspects, but also (as suggested by Rogers 1994) taking control of and responsibility for their learning.

In contrast, some non-participating students continued to struggle with knowing how to learn:

> "One of the hardest things has been to understand what is required of us. There seems to be set ways of doing things like researching topics, but no-one ever tells you how to do it, just that you've got to do it!" N11

> "Some of the articles we have to read are like reading a foreign language. I read a couple of paragraphs and have to stop because I realise that I haven't got a clue what it's talking about." N6

Assignment anxiety

Assessments are a further early anxiety that many students share, not only in terms of the technical aspects of undertaking assignments but also in terms of the personal aspects involved in submitting something for criticism. The ability to perform assignment work at the higher level and feeling that assignment skills were out-of-date or underdeveloped were common, which again may be indicative of low levels of self-confidence held by students in relation to their learning. Whilst most students expressed some level of concern in this area, many non-traditional students expressed concerns about not having completed assessed academic work for many years and had a greater anxiety in this regard:

> "The thought of doing assignments terrifies me! I don't know how or where to start." P9

> "I didn't do very well at school and a lot of the teachers made me feel that I was pretty stupid. A lot of those old feelings came back to me when I came to university." N7

> "I spend a lot of time worrying about the assessments. It's been a long time since I've written an essay and I'm not sure I can even remember how it all goes." N1

Traditional students' levels of concern in this regard appeared less acute:

> "I'm used to doing assignments...I did them all the time last year." P10

> "Assignments are good because you can get part of your course mark for them, so it's better than doing exams." N11

In addition to the technical aspects of assignment work students also describe personal anxieties and a fear of failure:

> "When I get a bad grade on an assignment I've worked hard on it really affects me...I can feel almost depressed by it. It makes me think that there's no point in being here." N7

> "Everyone wants to do well, but I'm really terrified about failing. It's such a bad feeling, especially if you think you've done alright...it can be really humiliating. I haven't got much confidence at the best of times, but a poor grade takes away what I've got left." N3

These comments indicate the personal and emotional investment that some students put into their study and at times suggests an emotional fragility where a poor grade can have a disproportionate and damaging effect on student confidence and self-esteem. My findings here appear to support the view that the experience of learning involves more than cognitive process. Students vividly describe the emotional aspects that are intrinsically linked to their learning, a finding also reflected in the work of, amongst others, Ciarrochi *et al* (2001), Boler (1999), Goleman (1995) and Rogers (1994).

Within the programme I built on the ideas of Rogers (1994:4) who held that learning "embraces more than intellectual activity. It involves understanding and dealing with personal perspectives and aspects of the self that interfere with the achievement of personal potential." As such I encouraged participating students to share and explore their feelings of anxiety and fear of failure within the groups:

"A bad assignment mark used to make me feel like quitting, but I've started to understand that it's not about one mark it's about making sure I've understood how to make it better next time." P4

"Talking with the others helped me to realise that if I fail an assignment it's not the end of the world. I've got some perspective on it now. I try and find something positive in it, some way of improving so that I don't make the same mistakes again." P9

"Getting your work criticised by the tutors is just part of the game. It might not feel like it at the time but I understand that they are trying to help me to achieve something more." P7

Such open emotionally-based discussions appear to have assisted students in understanding that critical assessments of aspects of their work were not personal criticisms or indicative of their overall learning ability, but merely feedback on one particular piece of work that aimed to give them some insight on how to improve.

The impact of information technology (IT)

Computers and other IT resources are a commonplace and intrinsic learning tool within many, if not all, higher education courses. Despite the academic community's familiarity with such resources not all students and especially some of the non-traditional students have such an easy affinity with it:

"I don't have a clue about computers...I don't even know how to switch one on!" P3

"Computers are a bit of a mystery to me...to be honest they are just another thing in a long list that I find difficult being on this course." P11

Using IT did not appear to pose such a threat to traditional students:

"The IT resources here are great! Twenty-four hour free access to the Internet can't be bad!" N4

"I like the way the IT is integrated into our teaching sessions...it's like that in the real world so it makes it more relevant." N11

This disparity between traditional and non-traditional students in relation to IT may be explained by the widespread use of computer technology in schools, from where most traditional students have recently come from. Non-traditional students my have left school some years ago and as such not had the same opportunity to develop IT literacy.

Through discussions within the group a wide range of ability was revealed amongst students in relation to IT. Within my journal I noted that there appeared to be a strong collaborative culture developing between participants with students with greater levels of IT literacy providing practical and technical advice and support to their less IT literate peers. Students became actively involved in supporting each other's learning and developed supportive relationships which may be especially beneficial to some of the non-traditional students who lacked the support of friends and family:

"The other students in the group have been great...very helpful and supportive. We've started to meet outside of the group times to help each other out." P3

"I've made some brilliant friendships within the group. We all want to do well on this course and we stick together to sort out any problems. There's a great sense of support for everyone within the group." P6

"When I started I didn't know anything about computers, but now I'm doing really well...one or two of the others in the group have spent time with me in the computer labs getting me up to speed. That wouldn't have happened if I hadn't been part of the group." P9

Such enabling of students to provide information, become skills models and reinforce the learning of their peers is consistent with the findings of Brookfield (1986). Beyond developing learning support networks, students appear to demonstrate an increased ability to be the active drivers of their learning development and take increasing responsibility for their learning. This appears to indicate a positive movement in learning conception, as students actively engage with their learning and initiate activities to support its development outside of the formal teaching arena.

Although some non-participating students also articulated the development of supportive student relationships, others were not as fortunate:

> "I have found it difficult to mix in with the other students...I know 1 or 2 of them, but not very well." N10

> "It would be nice to be able to talk to the other students when I get stuck, you know share ideas and stuff or just discuss things, but I haven't really got that kind of a relationship with any of them." N1

This failure to develop close personal learning relationships with other students may undermine successful learning for some students. This failure to connect with others may be due to the creation of a larger, more heterogenous student population – as described by Connor *et al* (1996) and Bridges (2000). My research builds on this understanding by providing an insight into the impact of such changes at the level of the individual student. Here too, the programme may offer some mitigation against the adverse effects of massification on students by providing a forum through which they can develop meaningful learning relationships that may bind students to each other and their studies.

Learning conception

Students describe anxiety in relation to their learning, and relate the impact of these feelings on their learning behaviour often in terms of interfering with the development of engaged learning behaviour:

"Part of me thinks that I'm not clever enough to be here, and I'd better keep quiet in class otherwise other people will start to notice it." P2

"I worry that the tutor is going to ask me a question that I won't know the answer to. I sit at the back and keep my head down so that they won't notice me and pick on me." N10

These notions of 'keeping quiet' and 'keeping ones head down' may be interpreted as an avoidance technique that restricts students' active participation in their learning. This appears likely to be damaging to the development of effective higher learning skills such as the ability to challenge, develop ideas, offer opinions, disagree with the views of others, question and generally take an active and engaged role within the classroom. As such it may contribute to building a barrier to the development of a 'being' learning conception. Also of interest is the powerful influence of students' emotions on their learning behaviour as illustrated by students' descriptions of how these anxious feelings disrupt participation and, at times, attendance:

"One tutor is really confrontational. He asks us loads of questions and even though I think I know the answers a lot of the time the atmosphere in the class makes it difficult to speak up...I've skipped a couple of his classes because I can't cope with the aggravation." P5

Within the group students were given the freedom to explore these feelings in a 'safe' atmosphere and begin to understand how they arise and their implications. These awareness-raising discussions resulted in students beginning to challenge their learning behaviour:

"I keep quiet in class because I don't want to make a fool of myself, but that means that I go away not understanding things, so the only person I'm really fooling is myself!" P7

"I want to feel accepted within the class, not be someone who stands out for asking too many questions. But I'm keeping quiet and still don't feel accepted, so my strategy isn't working!" P8

"I think I've been too concerned about what other people think of me. I need to change that, and if that means being more visible by speaking up in class, that's what I'll do." P3

Participation barriers may exacerbate the limited learning conception that many students illustrated in the early interviews as being a passive product founded on knowledge transfer:

"I tend to rely on memorising the notes that I've been given." N3

"My role is to sit and listen...take notes on what is being said in lectures...attend and pay attention" P2

This 'having' conception of higher education abdicates control of the learning to the tutor which is also reflected in further student comments:

"I think the tutor should take control...tell us what we need to know and make sure they cover it all with us." N4

"It's better if the tutor decides everything and structures the sessions so that we don't have to worry about things coming up in the exam that they haven't told us about." P1

In the groups I encouraged students to discuss and challenge these attitudes and for some this was something of a new experience:

"I'd never really thought about learning as something that was particularly active. You sit down, copy down what the tutor says, go away, memorise it and write it all down in the exam. The group really made me think about my role in all of that." P3

"I learned more about myself and the others around me than I ever thought possible. It's totally changed how I see myself and other people. I feel a lot more balanced now, I don't go off on one if I get a bad grade in something, I try and see it as an opportunity to get better!" P7

Interestingly, and in terms of learning behaviour, non-traditional students' comments suggest a more active approach. This may be because non-traditional students are less complacent about coming to university, since many have given up work, or are juggling the competing demands of work and family-life to attend. Alternatively their life experience may have provided them with skills and a level of independence that translates into their learning:

"Being here is sort of like my last chance, so I make the most of it by doing as much work as I can. I try and read ahead so that if something comes up at home I'm not going to be left behind." P8

"I'm used to just getting on with things, so I don't wait to be told what to do. We've all got a reading list and a course programme and I just carry on working through that on my own." P11

"Coming from work, I am used to working on my own and using my initiative, so I'm just applying those skills to studying. I get on with what needs to be done in the various subjects and check my progress with the tutor to make sure I'm on track." P2

Traditional students may be more accustomed to more directive learning approaches used in many schools which may restrict, initially, their capacity for independent higher learning:

"It's about the tutors giving me the facts, showing me what they know so that I know it too." N5

One of the central tenets of the person-centred approach used within my programme is the recognition that taking personal responsibility for learning is at the heart of becoming a developed higher learner. In the sessions students discussed personal responsibility directly and reflected on how much responsibility they took for their own learning. I noted within my journal at the end of these sessions that:

> "There appears to be a gradual recognition by participating students that they lie at the heart of their learning and ultimately their learning success; not the tutor or the computer or other students but they as individuals all have the potential to become better learners."

Participating students mirrored my understanding of the incremental changes taking place in relation to learning conception:

> "When I began my degree, I used to think that it was the tutor's responsibility to get me through the exam and structure my learning. You know, tell me everything I need to know and do to pass. I wanted to give that control to the tutor. I feel differently now...it's all about me, I take control of the whole thing – make sure I do lots of reading and preparation, ask lots of questions, really get into the studying." P9

> "I don't wait to be told what to do anymore, I just get on with things. If the tutor is late coming to the class, I get my books out and start without them!" P4

> "I feel like I have the power over my learning now. The tutor just guides me most of the time and provides an overall structure...it feels good to sort of be in control of your own learning destiny. I don't have to rely on the tutor's abilities. If I get a rubbish tutor I know that as long as I have the course outline I can get by anyway by doing it on my own." P8

One aspect of increasing the responsibility students take for their learning may be an increasing intolerance of other students who are not as engaged:

"I get really fed up with other students in the class who don't make any effort. They never contribute anything, just copy down what everyone else is saying. That's not fair – they can't expect to just take, take, take all the time – it's very frustrating." P2

Overall, participating students appear to describe increasing levels of personal activity in relation to the process of learning as opposed to merely receiving information. This suggests that their conception of learning is shifting from learning as a product to learning as a process. The earlier literature (see Marton *et al* 1993; Mann 2001 and Rogers 1994) suggests that viewing learning as a process rather than a product is indicative of a more developed learning conception.

This developing conception is also implied by changes in students learning behaviour. Participating students reported undertaking more reading, doing more thorough preparation for classes, contributing in classroom discussions and forging deeper and more meaningful relationship with their learning than they had done prior to the programme.

"I used to just turn up in the classes and hope the tutor wouldn't notice that I hadn't done much work. Now I sit at the front, I've done all the work, I ask loads of questions. I'm not afraid of the learning part anymore. I see it differently – it's about me, not anyone else and I don't need to be afraid of myself." P3

"I've actually starting speaking in class! I've never really liked doing that, but yesterday I was sitting there not understanding something and I thought to myself about what we had been talking about in the development group about having a choice and doing something active to improve the way I learn. I made a decision to speak up and say that I didn't understand. The tutor was great and explained it to me, and I was really surprised at how much better that made me feel – more confident and more included as part of the class." P1

"It's all about control. You only have one chance of being at university and I'm not going to let anyone interfere in my chance of succeeding. I'm getting

much more confident – I've got to the point where I challenged the tutor on something they said. I never thought I would be able to do that." P11

Some non-participating students also describe taking more control of their learning, but sometimes in more reluctant terms:

"You have to do most things for yourself. I know it's my responsibility but the tutors are paid a lot of money and they should do more to get me through." N2

"Some tutors expect you to do most of the work on your own...I don't mind doing some of it, but I think they should be prepared to summarise key points and put together all the course notes for us. It's a lot of work to do it all on your own." N9

Further non-participating students expressed a more reluctant view of taking personal responsibility for their learning, feeling that being expected to engage with their learning was somehow unfair and in so doing persist with their conception of learning as a product:

"The tutors should tell us what they know, it's quicker than us finding it out for ourselves. It costs a lot of money to be here, I'm paying for their expertise and they should be giving me what I want, not telling me to go and do it for myself!" N8

"I'm used to teachers doing everything for me...I think it should be more like that here." N3

"In school, whatever the teacher says goes. No-one ever disagreed or even discussed much with them, you just wrote down what they said and that was the end of the story. I find it difficult to get out of that habit, I know I should be taking more of an active part in the classroom, you know, talking and saying my opinion and stuff, but I'm not really interested in discussing, I just want to get the notes from the tutor so that I can pass the exam." N4

The learning relationship with tutors

Students invariably view tutors as one component of their learning. Perhaps ideally, higher education may be viewed as a learning partnership between tutors and students. Most students however, describe initial difficulty in approaching or challenging academic staff frequently describing them as unapproachable and unhelpful:

> "He (the tutor) makes me feel that I'm a nuisance when I ask him anything. He's stopped looking at me when I speak. It makes me feel invisible, small, you know, like I don't matter or even exist half of the time." N2

> "Some staff are fantastic, really friendly and helpful. Others are a waste of time! They don't want to talk to you, to help you or anything. It's as if you are one big inconvenience." P2

> "One tutor told me that I was asking too many questions! He was serious and I could tell that he thought I was just a nuisance...What's the point in trying to get your head around the subject when that's his attitude." P9

> "I could never just go and knock on a tutor's door and ask for help. I'd be afraid that they would shout at me or something." N1

> "I don't think it's a good idea to challenge tutors too much...after all they are the one's who will mark the exams!" N9

Writers (see Palombo Weiss 2000 and Brown 2002) suggest that tutors who are distant, unhelpful and unsupportive of learners' needs may negatively impact on students' learning development. My findings support this view, where tutors failure to establish learning relationships with students objectifies them – making them feel 'invisible'. Gibbs (2001:86) warns that this can lead to the "rejection of deep intrinsic learning and personal development."

Inhibiting the development of constructive learning relationships with tutors is a concern. If higher education seeks to create active, engaged and empowered life-long learners then all parties in the learning relationship must work towards achieving this. One particular difficulty that students raise in this area is challenging tutors. The ability to challenge tutors' knowledge authority has to be an intrinsic element of developing these higher learning skills, but this is something that some traditional students in particular struggle with:

> "I don't feel comfortable challenging the tutor. They're the expert and know a lot more about the subject than me, so I just accept whatever it is they say." N4

> "The classroom really belongs to the tutor doesn't it? It's their space that they are in control of, so it's not the sort of place where students really do much talking." N11

What seems to be revealed is an unspoken acceptance that the authority and control within the tutor-student learning relationship lies with the tutor not the student and this may impair active engagement. Students' response may be to relinquish the power within the relationship into the hands of the tutors. Possible explanations of why traditional students may be more susceptible to this passive-type behaviour may lie in the fact that they tend to be younger with most coming straight from school where they may be accustomed to a more authoritarian and directive regime.

Non-traditional students appear more likely to challenge and question the tutor:

> "Some tutors don't want to know about having discussions, they just want to say whatever it is they have to say and leave. I've lost count of the number of times they tell me 'that's just the way it is' when I ask them why." P9

> "He [the tutor] never really listens to us. If someone questions him he just tells us to read it in the book! It makes me feel that there is no point in being here half the time." N7

"One tutor told me that there was nothing he could do to help, when I said that I didn't understand what he was talking about!" P11

The presumption that tutors have knowledge authority was discussed amongst students in the programme and students reflected on issues concerning the power and control of their learning. I encouraged students to begin to challenge their initial assumptions and consider where the control for their learning may be better placed:

"I have started to see my learning needs as being the most important thing within the classroom, and if that means I have to confront or interrupt the tutor and keep asking questions even though I can see they are getting annoyed with me, then that's tough!" P2

"I asked my tutor about something they said in the class the other day, and it felt good. It was like I was taking control of it and asserting myself. We ended up having a good discussion about NPV!" P1

This developing ability to challenge tutors was not as evident amongst some of the non-participating students:

"Who needs the hassle of getting involved in discussing things – the tutor should just hand over the notes and let's get on with it!" N9

"When I first came here I thought the tutors would tell us everything we needed to know to pass the exam. It had never really occurred to me that I would have to do most of the work on my own." N7

Participating students were not only challenging their role, but also that of the tutor. Explicit discussions of the role of tutor and student in the learning relationship appeared to enable students to begin to develop their self-concept (advocated as beneficial by Cotton 1995) and view the tutor as a partner in this relationship. Such frank discussions facilitated the students in developing realistic expectations of themselves and their tutors within the learning partnership. Whilst this may indicate that students' initial reluctance to become more active participants in the classroom

can be overcome it does suggest that they need support to do this. This may have implications for the approach of tutors in terms of giving students tacit permission to become engaged within the classroom.

As participating students became more aware of the role of the respective parties within their learning I noted that they became more critical of other influential parties within their learning:

> "It's not about the content of the classes, the technical things, it's more about the delivery side. This one tutor talks with his eyes down, he never even looks at us. I don't think he'd notice if someone dropped down dead in the class. It's not good enough...he's not good enough!" P5

> "I switch-off when the tutor just reads from the handout. What's the point of that! I could read the handout for myself at home. I want the class to be more active, get us doing things, talking to each other, asking questions, debating issues – not just sitting there like a dummy hanging on his every word." P3

Encouragingly it appears that students wanted to engage, to be engaged and their frustration with tutors who denied them this opportunity in the classroom was transparent. Raising students' self-awareness and developing realistic expectations of what is expected of them and their tutors within the higher learning relationship appears to have been constructive in encouraging students to take control of and engage with their learning. As such it may provide a means on supporting students in the developmental process of 'learning-to-learn'.

Some non-participating students were also critical of tutors but some appeared more likely to passively tolerate what they perceived as 'poor' tutoring:

> "One particular tutor is very bad. He gives us these really confused handouts that are full of mistakes. I'm bound to fail his subject, but what can I do? I can't change the tutor can I?" N7

> "I think poor tutors definitely have an affect on my grades. Good tutors do a lot of the work for you, go through all the questions and give you all the answers." N3

Such student comments appear to reveal a degree of resignation to their situation which may encourage the reliance on a 'having' conception of learning, and moreover, position such students' assessments of tutors in relation to their ability and willingness to meet these passive learning expectations.

The higher learning context and the social aspects of learning

The higher education context, especially increasing class sizes, is reflected in the commentary of students, not so much in relation to resources but especially in relation to the level of social and personal classroom interaction:

> "I'm totally unknown in the class, by tutors and other students. No-one ever uses my name or really talks to me directly. You're lucky just to get a seat in some classes." N3

> "I feel very isolated at college. I spend most of my time on my own and find it hard to get to know anyone. I thought in the classes I would make friends, but it doesn't work like that. There isn't much opportunity to talk to the other students." N1

> "I realised the other day how lonely I feel being here. I thought part of coming to university would be the great social life – what a mistake. There are so many of us in the classes that I don't feel that I know anybody very well...it's very depressing." N6

The accounts of non-participating students appear to be describing what Mann (2001) describes as an alienated disposition towards their studies. Such alienation is characterised by a lack of personal involvement with the experience and a struggle to find personal meaning and relevance within that experiences. She argues that this is

damaging to learning conception which becomes detached, what Rogers' (1969) describes as 'learning from the neck up'. The experience of participating students appears different in this regard:

> "I've made some very good friends in this group...friends that I can talk to properly about college-stuff as well as personal things." P10

> "I thing the group has been so helpful in all kinds of ways – settling in, making friends...just feeling part of the whole university thing, you know...just a sense of belonging here." P8

The programme with its feeling focus may have enabled a more holistic experience – including thoughts and feelings – that lends a personal dynamic that encouraged students to engage and attach to the institution and their studies. Tapping into the emotional dimension may prevent the "hidden unconscious alienation" that Fromm (1992:31) described and assist students in moving towards a 'being' conception of learning. My results suggest that locating personal meaning within students' learning may therefore catalyse the development of deeper learning conception.

In addition, the increasing reliance on information technology as a teaching medium also impacts on learning behaviour in terms of the personal or social dimension:

> "We spend most of our time using computer packages, just staring at the screen. It would be better if we did more group or team activities." N3

> "I get frustrated in a lot of the classes because they rely so much on using computers. I like to talk and discuss issues with other students, share ideas you know, but it doesn't happen like that. I feel like a little robot a lot of the time not a human being." P4

> "If I'd known it was going to be so much I.T. I don't think I would have enrolled. What's the point of just using computers all the time. Sitting facing a screen all the time is not a good way of getting to know people." P9

What students appear to describe is a lack of opportunity for personal contact in their learning, with a large focus being placed on cognitive abilities, and knowledge transfer in terms of acquiring technical skills. This ignores the very human aspects of learning - often the most powerful (see More 1976 and Peelo 1994) - including developing learning relationships with tutors and other students and discussing issues and difficulties in a supportive and nurturing learning environment.

Furthermore these comments reveal students' desire for active, engaged and enjoyable learning experiences - perhaps overlooked by some tutors who prioritise the technical and cognitive content above the overall experience of learning. In this regard tutors may collude with some students' view of higher learning as passive knowledge transfer rather than striving for an active and engaged learning experience.

Students' perception of the impact of tutors on learning extends beyond issues of control and knowledge authority, to impinge upon the learning environment, classroom culture and ultimately the learning experience of participants.

> "One particular tutor has a way of looking at me that makes me feel really stupid!" P2

> "It's very difficult to get to see some tutors outside of the classroom. I spend hours hanging around outside their rooms like a stalker." N11

Whilst directly challenging tutors' behaviour and approaches is beyond the remit of my research, through the programme it was possible for students to discuss the issue and to focus on their response to it. To this end the programme was able to offer support to students indirectly in dealing with this issue:

> "I try not to let my opinions of tutors get in the way of me studying. If I think they're not very good I know that I will have to work harder on my own to get through the course." P10

> "I understand that not all tutors are going to be the way I want them. I can't change them, so I have to change the way I respond to them instead. If they

talk too much I try and ask questions, if they go too fast I ask them to slow down...that kind of thing. I try and stop them from taking too much control if I can." P2

My results may indicate that providing an emotional learning forum via the programme may have given students an opportunity to identify and use their emotions to stimulate their learning through the process described by Carr (2001) as 'emotion activating attention.'

Changing behaviours

As the programme progressed I began to notice some changes in the behaviour of students within the group. My journal entry for week 6 noted:

> "Students within the group seemed a lot more animated today. They clearly feel comfortable and relaxed with each other and me. They began talking and raising issues without any prompting at all. I sat back and watched them driving the whole thing forward, discussing each others difficulties, supporting each other, suggesting solutions all with very little input from me. I felt a little bit surplus to requirement which was such a good feeling!"

To illustrate the way in which the group achieved this, the following summary of part of that session, together with my reflections (both of which I recorded within my journal immediately after the session) are produced below:

Rob (P3) was describing how, having been away from formal education for over 10 years he was very fearful of using the library. He explained to the others that he knew how important it was for him to visit and productively use the library resources, but despite having attended the mass and obligatory library induction, he still had very little understanding of the resources available or how they could be accessed productively. He described making several attempts to visit the library and discover for himself how the systems worked but he had been met with some unhelpful staff which had exacerbated his confusion and anxiety. He was becoming increasingly anxious and agitated about this predicament. The group allowed him the space to

describe and release his feelings after which another student in the group confronted him with her observation that he was not going to be able to get through three years at university without constructively using the library resources. The group started to be curious about where his feelings were coming from and the impact they were having on him. He reflected on this for a while and started to reveal a much broader underlying fear of failing that he had brought to university with him. He spoke about how he had felt that he had always been a disappointment to his family and his perception that his siblings were so much more competent and successful than he was. He always felt like the one who was not as bright or creative as the others within his family. His response to these feelings of inferiority and lack of self-confidence had usually resulted in him withdrawing rather than confronting the issue that was causing him difficulty. He started to see that he had allowed these feelings to dominate the way he perceived himself and his own abilities. Someone in the group interjected by asking him if he felt that he was a failure. His automatic (and arguably learned) response to this was - "My family think I am"- to which his challenger responded - "Yes, but do <u>you</u> think you are a failure?" Rob found this question very difficult to answer was silent for a moment and then continued to project his perception of his family's rating of his abilities until again he was challenged as to why he could not or would not answer the question directly. This persistent challenge drew his attention to his avoidance behaviour and allowed him to focus on how this learned response was acting as a barrier to his learning progress by preventing him from confronting the library issue.

Such focus provided him with some insight into the nature of his difficulties. He started to see the pattern of his behaviour and consider the impact it was having on his university life. He had achieved a greater level of self-understanding. Once this had occurred it acted as a catalyst for changing his learning. He started to consider how he could change his response to difficult situations and find a new and more appropriate way of responding. Another member of the group mentioned that there were some part-time job vacancies within the library for students – helping with filing, replacing books on shelves etc. – and Rob decided that he would apply as soon as the session was over.

At the end of the session I reflected in my journal on what had struck me about this episode. Aside from the change in one individual what appears significant is the way the others group members had responded to him. They were patient and tolerant, giving him space to discuss his fears, but also prepared to challenge and confront him about aspects of his behaviour that they found were unhelpful or damaging. Using a person-centred approach within the programme appears to set a powerful empathic tone within the group, and students were reflecting this tone and 'way of being' with each other within the group. I found the confrontation aspect of the discourse quite powerful since it moved the discussion beyond sympathetic listening to something much more vivid and dynamic and in such a person-centred way.

The following week Rob returned to the group full of enthusiasm and confidence. He had taken one of the jobs within the library, made friends with some of the library staff he had previously considered unapproachable and had some training on the systems in place and available resources within the library. Another entry in my journal at the end of that session recorded my further reflections:

> "He seemed more 'alive' today than I have ever seen him before. He was full of energy and seemed so happy that he had taken control of his library fears in such a positive and direct manner. His positive experience of taking active control when things get tough has been infectious within the group, with others keen to identify aspects of their learning behaviour that they can challenge and develop."

What this episode appears to suggest is the potential that focusing on students' feelings and what underlies them offers in terms of facilitating changes in learned behaviour in a way that empowers students to take control and develop their higher learning abilities.

This section of the chapter has discussed the impact of my emotionally-focused programme on students learning and suggests the potential for such a vehicle in supporting the development of students' learning conception. In addition my findings provide experiential insight into the impact of the risks and anxieties that students have in relation to their learning and the implicit assumption that students innately

knowing how to learn which may contribute to the difficulties that some students face in terms of developing supportive learning relationships with tutors. In this regard my programme, through the provision of a social and personalised support network, may assist students to modify their learning behaviour. The next section progresses to consider the third area of interest within my research, namely that of retention.

- **Reaching the destination – retention**

Issues concerning leaving university are present within students' experiential accounts throughout their first year of study. My findings here concur with those of Yorke (1999), and Hatt (2002) in that retention pressures appear to be most acutely felt at certain key times, including the first few weeks of the first term, undertaking the first assignment(s), and returning from the Christmas vacation.

Students talk about leaving university almost as soon as they arrive:

> "I know it's only been one week, but I can't help feeling that I've changed my mind...I feel like I've taken on too much...I'm worrying about not being able to cope with it." P2

> "All I could think about today was leaving, just getting on the train and going home. I never thought I'd feel like this – it's a big shock." N5

Some traditional students describe issues arising from the practical side of moving away from home:

> "I feel like I'm having to grow-up in a week! All of a sudden I'm on my own and have to do everything for myself...I don't feel ready for it." P6

Non-traditional students appear to present issues arising from more complex practicalities such as childcare and partners and these too can present particular difficulties for students:

"I have to get the kids up at half past six if I have a 9 o'clock class and leave college by half 2 to fetch them from school. By the time I get home and cook them tea and tidy up it's about 9 and I feel too tired to even think about college work. I spend all day running around from one class to the next and all night running around after the kids. If I had any energy left I'd go for a drink before thinking about doing any reading for tomorrow! I'm not sure I can do this for much longer." P11

The difficulties involved in managing these practicalities may offer some explanation of the findings of Paul (2001), Smith (2002), Hall *et al* (2000) and Bennett (2003) which demonstrate that student drop-out is higher amongst non-traditional students.

The first assignment also acts as a 'stress-point' which causes students to consider their viability within higher education:

"I didn't know where to start with the assignments and I have to admit it crossed my mind on more than one occasion that it would be easier just to pack it all in and forget about the whole thing." N6

"Doing the first assignment was very nerve-racking...I wasn't sure if I was doing the right thing with it and didn't want to keep running to the tutor all the time. I put a lot of work into it and was disappointed with the grade I got. It made me think that the course was too hard for me and I thought a lot about leaving at that stage." P8

"My daughter was ill when I was trying to do the first assignment and I missed the deadline for submission. I missed quite a few classes and had almost made my mind up to leave at that stage." P11

Returning from the Christmas vacation is another time that caused students to consider their long-term future within higher education:

"I didn't want to come back after Christmas. Being at home made me realise how much I missed my friends and family back home. If it hadn't been for my parents pushing me I don't think I would have come back." P4

"By the time Christmas came the novelty of being at university had well and truly worn off. I started to think that this is what it was going to be like for the next three years, and I wasn't sure it was what I wanted anymore. It was a struggle coming back." N5

"My husband didn't want me to continue coming to University in January. I think he'd got used to me being home and was hoping I'd change my mind about continuing. He put quite a bit of pressure on me to leave at that stage...I thought about it but decided to keep going if I could." P8

Of the 64 students within the cohort used for this research, 9 students withdrew before the end of their first year of study. The following table presents a breakdown of the 9 withdrawing students:

Table 6.2 Analysis of Withdrawn Students

STUDENT	Participating in programme	Student Status	Date of Leaving*	Reason for Leaving*
1	NO	Non-traditional	21/10/00	Personal reasons – unspecified
2	NO	Traditional	28/10/00	Transferred to different university
3	NO	Non-traditional	2/11/00	Family commitments
4	NO	Traditional	8/11/00	Unhappy with course
5	NO	Non-traditional	13/11/00	Personal reasons – unspecified
6	NO	Non-traditional	15/12/00	Financial pressures
7	NO	Traditional	10/1/01	Decided to take year out
8	NO	Non-traditional	4/4/01	Close family bereavement
9	NO	Non-traditional	23/4/01	Pregnancy

*Data extracted from exit interviews or personal tutoring interviews undertaken after students decision to withdraw.

The above withdrawing students represent 14% of the cohort. This would suggest that of the 11 students taking part in the programme there would be a reasonable expectation that 14% of participating students, (i.e.1.5 of them) would withdraw. However, none of the participating students withdrew during their first year of study. Perhaps this is coincidental or it may suggest that the programme had a positive influence on students' tendency to remain within higher education.

Further analysis of the comments of participating students sheds some light on the disparity. Despite none of the participating students withdrawing, they did discuss leaving university on a number of occasions within the programme. Many students expressed relief at being able to openly discuss and share thoughts on what some perceived to be a taboo subject:

> "No-one really talks about leaving. A lot of people are thinking about it, but it's almost as if you're not allowed to say it, because it marks you out as a quitter and a failure before you even start!" P5

> "I thought about leaving quite a lot, but was too afraid to say it to anyone...but someone started talking about it in the group one day...they just came right out and said they were thinking of leaving...it was great...like a big floodgate opening and all the pressure came out...it was suddenly OK to talk about it." P1

Simply being able to talk about their feelings within the groups seemed to provide a good deal of support to students. It also allowed them to explore other options, such as transferring or deferring their studies.

> "I hit a patch when I really wanted to leave. The group were very supportive... just by listening. No-one pressurised me to stay, or told me what I should do, they just gave me room to think aloud about it really. I decided to

stick it out, and I'm really glad I did...I could so easily have just been another one of those drop-out statistics!" P9

Other participating students were more explicit about the impact the programme had on them:

"If it hadn't have been for the group I would have left during week 2!" P6

"I think having the space in the development sessions to say that I wanted to leave...getting this big secret out, made it much easier to cope and deal with my feelings." P3

"Listening to others describing how they wanted to leave the course helped me to come to terms with my own feelings about leaving. It gave me a sense that these feelings were normal...knowing others felt the same gave a different perspective on it...it was less of an issue." P1

Some non-participating students were not as fortunate in terms of receiving support:

"When I told my tutor that I wanted to leave, she didn't try to persuade me to stay or anything...she just said that if I'd made my mind up then I'd have to fill a form out and then I could go. I wasn't saying it for attention or anything, but I pretty much decided to leave on the spur of the moment and it would have been nice if someone at the university had at least pretended to care about me leaving." N3

"I tried to talk to my personal tutor about leaving, but he told me to pull myself together and that everyone felt like that but I just had to get on with it and stop being so silly. I left about 2 days after that conversation." N9

My programme appeared to support students in terms of retention in a number of ways. Firstly many participating students commented on the positive effect that being able to share their feelings in a safe place had on them – describing the release of

feelings, finding that feelings were often shared by others in the group and experiencing being heard:

> "I got a strong sense of being part of something by being in the group. It made me feel included...important even...like people were really interested in what was going on with me." P1

Working in small groups personalised the development work and provided an opportunity for students to develop supportive relationships between each other:

> "I wouldn't still be here at university if it wasn't for the group sessions. Having somewhere to go and share things...talk things over...knowing that other people felt just like me...it made everything seem much better." P2

Lastly the programme made students aware of the raft of support systems and resources that were in place within the university, and empowered them to recognise any need for assistance and support them in accessing it:

> "Often we'd discuss an issue, like giving a presentation or leaving or something, and someone would share what they'd found in the library on it, or in student services...we made each other aware of stuff and often went together to get help with things like that." P10

This sense of a shared experience, of being heard and understood, of feeling valued and cared about and of being included within the group all appears to have had a positive influence on students' sense of belonging within the university which may go some way towards explaining why no participating students withdrew during the first year of study.

The last section of this chapter considers the personal development programme itself and through students' perceptions and my reflections offers some insights into its effectiveness.

- **Reflections on the Personal Development Programme**

The feelings focus and group participation

I developed my programme to specifically focus on feelings, exploring their impact on students' approaches and attitudes to learning and using this feelings-focus to develop a greater self-awareness of the experience of higher education in order to support students' engagement with and development of their higher learning. As such it was important to convey this primary focus to participating students. In all sessions, but especially the early sessions, time was spent specifically focusing on these feelings, giving students the opportunity to express, explore and share how they were really feeling. Students were quite tentative to begin, understandably having reservations about sharing their experiences with a group of strangers. Students articulated these reservations:

> "University is about thinking isn't it? Logic, facts, information. When someone asks you how you feel rather than what you think it throws you off-guard a bit." P10

> "Feelings are much more personal than thoughts. Sharing them with others is more difficult because they are so personal." P4

I noted in my journal at the end of the first development session that one of the difficulties in establishing the programme was going to be getting students to talk about their emotions;

> "Students seem to associate being at university as a thinking-only pursuit, which leaves no room or place for emotions. Got a sense from students today that feelings were almost a taboo subject. They started to look quite nervous and suspicious when I suggested that we talk a little bit about how we felt about being at university. They appeared even more surprised when I started by telling them how I was feeling!"

I attempted to facilitate the disclosure of feelings by sharing my feelings with the group as an example and over time this appeared to create a trust within the group which gave students the permission and support they needed to talk about their fears and anxieties in relation to what was happening for them whilst at university. Although most students responded well to such encouragement it remained difficult for others:

> "I found it hard talking about how I felt about things. I'm not a very touchy-feely person and it was tough going at times." P4

For those who were more readily able to share their feelings, one of the positive consequences for them was that they began to feel heard, giving them a sense of empowerment:

> "Coming to this group is really liberating. I know that sounds a bit corny but normally you have to watch what you say in case you upset someone or give someone the wrong impression. It's not like that in here, you can just say it like you feel it." P3

> "I feel free in here. Free to say how I really feel about university. I can be me in here and own up to things that I spend hours worrying about on my own." P10

Allied to this sense of freedom students also described a sense of relief and release experienced by being given a safe forum and the opportunity to talk freely:

> "It is always such a relief to come to this group. I can stop pretending that everything is OK and actually get some real support." P6

> "I look forward to coming here each week, it keeps me going. I carry around all the bad experiences that I have in class all week, and then I can finally come here, get them all out, have a good look at them and walk away from them at the end!" P11

What students appear to be describing is how the group provided a release valve that was not as readily accessible to non-participating students:

> "There's no-one to talk to here about your problems. Tutors are too busy or not interested; you can't get an appointment with a counsellor and to be honest I don't want people seeing me going down there!" N8

> "You're pretty-much on your own. If I need help and support I go to my family." N2

Not all participating students were able to share their feelings as openly with the others. One particularly quiet and reserved student preferred to listen rather than participate. I was concerned that this would prevent him fully engaging with the programme, and also that it would position him as voyeuristic and be detrimental to others in the group who may feel 'watched'. One student commented:

> "Some people in the group were not as good at sharing their experiences as others...it felt like they were watching rather than participating at times. It's better if everyone shares more." P9

In addition such passive behaviour in the group may also be indicative of a generalised pattern of passivity in relation to learning. Since the literature (see Ramsden 1987; Rogers 1994 and Fromm 1982) suggests that passive, disengaged behaviour may be symptomatic of an undeveloped conception of learning (which is something that I sought to challenge), it did not seem possible or desirable to condone it within the group. Tackling the issue was something of a dilemma however, since on the one hand it is not possible to compel participation (hence the decision to use volunteers), but on the other hand non-participation was not an option. I decided to challenge his silence but without judgement, initially by verbally recognising it – "You are very quiet...", and later by offering verbal encouragement using opening statements to him such as: "How are you feeling today?" or "How was your week?" Although this student responded to direct prompts and on occasion shared his feelings with the group, he continued to remain reserved. This made me recognise that the programme in its group format may not be suited to the development needs of every

student, and perhaps individual sessions with a tutor may be more appropriate for some. Despite his reluctant participation his comments at the completion of the sessions were revealing:

> "I've never really been part of a group before...I'm a bit of a loner. I can't tell you what it's meant to me to feel included for the first time...I know I'm quiet in the group but that doesn't mean that I don't feel things just like everyone else...I might not say much but I'm there, do you know what I mean, really there with it all going on inside. Just being there makes a big difference to me." P1

Despite the lack of active participation this student did seem to have derived a lot of personal benefit from being part of the group and it occurred to me that perhaps I was confusing the issues of *participating in* and *being engaged with* the programme. When this student spoke about being "there...really there" he seemed to be saying that despite his reticence to speak, he was involved and actively engaged with the discussion in a way that was truly meaningful and safe for him.

The issue of engaging students with a programme of development has other difficulties. One particular student who had initially been a very active participant within the group appeared to lose interest in the programme after the first few weeks and appeared to view the programme as too paternalistic for her needs:

> "I find it difficult having to explain myself to the group...it's like being in front of my parents all the time...I just want to have a good time...the social side of university is just as important as the studying side, but the group don't seem to understand that...they take it all so seriously." P10

Although she continued to voluntarily attend all the sessions it was clear that her initial interest in studying was beginning to take a back seat to the pursuit of a full social life. I noted in my journal at the end of one particular session that:

> "Kim has become quite negative within the group. She is struggling to find any meaning in studying and seems to be distracting herself by going out as

much as possible. She is very reluctant to discuss her feelings towards studying and is currently very defensive. I am concerned about the impact that her negativity will have on the group."

Despite my concerns about her impact on the group I did not think it appropriate to intervene since this was an opportunity to explore the group's reaction to a range of participants. I allowed the situation to develop and recorded the group's response within my journal notes.

Over a period of several weeks the group seemed to go through several stages in relation to Kim's situation. Firstly, they allowed her to vent her frustrations, giving her space within sessions to talk about her feelings. The group responded initially by listening, offering understanding and by verbalising supportive comments. However, as Kim's negative stance persisted over subsequent weeks the group began to challenge Kim's position. I was quite excited by this response because I felt it was indicative of the group moving beyond the polite acceptance of others views and actually beginning to become a developing group with the confidence to confront and explore outside of its comfort zone. The group progressed to encourage Kim to consider the impact her behaviour was having on her studies, but more importantly to consider why she felt so negatively towards her studies in the first instance. My journal entry at the end of the session records my feelings:

"Felt very excited by the group's development today! Kim continues to be very negative in the sessions and today the group went further than the quiet sympathy it had been showing her over the last week or so. They started to challenge her view, getting her to firstly think about her behaviour and then talk about where all her feelings were coming from. To hear them challenge and confront her with herself was very rewarding. I could sense that the students had a growing sense of confidence within and control over the group. What was also interesting was the gentle way that they offered their challenges. In the middle of Kim's string of negative comments Rob interjected with the question: "Why are you still here if you feel that studying is such a waste of time?" This stopped Kim dead in her tracks."

Kim found such challenges uncomfortable:

> "I just want to go out and have a good time, it's no big deal. You're trying to get me to say that my studies are suffering – well perhaps they are, but its no-one else's business is it? I feel that the group is on my case." P10

Over time Kim's position did begin to alter and at the end of the programme she commented:

> "I felt very unhappy for the first few months...angry and resentful, mostly because I didn't want to be here, but my teachers and family put all this pressure on me...it was easier to do what they wanted. I complained a lot in the group! But they put up with me and when I went on and on about how I was going to leave they somehow managed to drag me along with them. They kept me here...I don't know how they did it but I'm very grateful. I'm so glad that I didn't leave now." P10

Persuading students to take control

One of the key aspects of using group work was to encourage students to take control of the group as a first step in taking control of their learning. To this end I felt it was important that my programme should not be restricted to being a release valve for students, somewhere to come and unburden themselves, although arguably there is significant merit in this alone. I was keen for it to be a meaningful development vehicle and I was eager for students to take control of the sessions in the same way as I hoped they would take control of their learning. This was not without its difficulties. An entry in my journal at the end of the second week of the programme recognised these problems:

> "Feel that it is going to be difficult to encourage students to take control of the sessions. They seem to want to defer to me as the 'expert' and lead the group. I explained the nature of the sessions and the group itself as belonging to the students. There were some long silences followed by some anxious

suggestions of what we could spend time discussing and developing. It seems that it is not easy for students to move away from the notion that teachers are in control and after the many years of directed learning that some students have experienced taking control may be something of a struggle for them."

I persevered in the sessions that followed and continued to encourage students to take control, share their experiences and discuss the issues that were of concern to them. I regularly shared my feelings with the students including my concerns about their need for me to be the expert lead which we discussed. By the end of the fourth week and through these frank discussions and my persistent refusal to take control and lead, most students began to understand that it was safe for them to take control of the sessions and they started to open-up and discuss their personal experiences of higher education. What was interesting was that students appeared to need to be given permission to control, lead and direct the group. It occurred to me at this time that the same issue of permission might be relevant to classroom participation for some students.

Sessions within the programme were increasingly directed by the participating students who discussed the issues that were pertinent to their learning as they arose. As a result of this, numerous technical aspects were discussed, including how to do a literature search, what is a critical analysis, how to reference work, how many hours of study they should be doing outside of the class and what makes an effective presentation. Although the programme had a feelings focus it was flexible enough to at times be used as an information sharing or practical session.

Whilst the programme may have had a number of positive influences on students, they also offered some criticisms of it:

"We ran out of time a couple of times. An hour isn't long enough really. Sometimes we were just getting to the good bits and we had to stop which was a bit frustrating." P8

"I don't think I got as much out of the course as I would have liked. A lot of the time my head was all over the place and I think it would have been better to have had some one-on-one discussions." P2

From my perspective, other difficulties I encountered were that on occasion, participants would begin to discuss issues outside of the remit of the course, perhaps personal issues. Whilst it is arguable that all issues are relevant since each individual is influenced and shaped in part by their experiences both in and outside the higher education environment, I did feel that it was necessary at times to steer the group away from 'extraneous' issues.

In addition one particular student (Katy) had quite a traumatic upbringing and on one occasion she became very tearful and upset when the group were discussing family influences. She began to describe her early life and I quickly realised that there was a need to intervene to both protect Katy from revealing aspects of herself that she may later feel uncomfortable about and to prevent others in the group from being unduly affected by aspects of Katy's early life. Whilst the group seemed content to allow Katy to talk, in this instance I gently intervened and thanked Katy for her courage in speaking about her experiences and asked her if she would prefer to talk to one of the student counsellors about her early life, which she agreed to do. Whilst drawing an avenue of the group's conversation to a close is something I ordinarily avoided to prevent compromising the students' control of the group, in this instance I felt it was warranted because Katy's issues were outside of most people's understanding and deeply personal to Katy. This episode did not affect Katy's subsequent attendance or contribution within the group as she continued to attend the programme and remained a valued and respected member of the group.

To finish, I asked the students if they had any concluding perceptions or feelings they would like to share about the impact of the programme on their higher learning experience. This is what they had to say:

"It was really worthwhile. I made some very strong friendships, it gave me stacks of support when I needed it and I think I know myself better now than I ever did." P2

"I started to save up all the things that were troubling me during the week and bring them to the group and put them all down. I'd come into the group feeling awful and leave feeling ready for another week." P8

"The best thing about the course was having the support of other students. I don't have anybody to talk to at home about college-stuff, and it helped me to talk through things with people who were going through the same things as me." P1

"The course was like my safety-net. If things got really bad, I always knew that there was somewhere I could go to talk it through." P11

"This course has shown me how I can take charge of my learning...how I can be in control of it, rather than it controlling me." P3

"I found it difficult to relate to some of the things other people in the group talked about. I'm quite young; I've never had a job and I don't have any kids so stuff like that went over my head. It did make me realise that some people here are having a much harder time than me though." P6

"All the people in the group became very good friends. It was a nice feeling walking into class and having a group of really good friends to sit and talk with." P9

"We shared a lot of deep stuff in the group and that kind of created a very strong bond between us all that continued long after the sessions finished. We used to carry on discussing stuff over coffee and lunchtime, so it was like a continuous support system." P4

"I learned an awful lot about myself and other people. I got some of my old confidence back which was great." P5

- **Summarising comments**

This chapter has drawn together the findings of my research under the key areas of transition, learning to learn and retention as set out in my research questions. In addition I have reflected on the use of a personal development programme as a vehicle of 'better' student support throughout the chapter. In particular I have highlighted the key differences between the experiences of traditional and non-traditional students and between participating and non-participating students.

There appear to be a number of differences between the experience of traditional and non-traditional students as they begin higher education revealed by my research including, for some non-traditional students:

- The existence of family opposition, negative attitudes or lack of support for a student's desire to attend university.
- The perception of being different, often interpreted by students as a sense of risk, or allied to a stronger need to 'fit-in'.
- Having to balance more complex social, domestic and employment responsibilities with studying.
- Initially being less positive about studying with a greater sense of the difficulties they will face.
- Possessing less accurate expectations of higher education and as such facing a wider transition gap.
- Some degree of unfamiliarity with IT resources.
- More able to challenge tutors.
- More likely to initially adopt an active approach to learning.

The programme itself appears to have the following impacts on participating students:

- Facilitated the development of supportive relationships between students.
- Reduced the incidence of withdrawal during the year (0%).

- Appeared to stimulate a greater movement towards active or 'being' type conceptions of learning and a greater reduction in passive or 'having' type conceptions of learning.
- Increased the sense of belonging and of being known and understood within the university.
- Supported the transition of students including the emotional, practical, social and cognitive aspects.
- Encouraged students to be active learners, taking responsibility and control of their learning.
- Developed ability to participate in the classroom and to challenge the authority presumption given to tutors.

The final chapter of my thesis draws together the main issues arising from my research and attempts to reflect on my findings against the wider context of the higher education sector and as such consider its wider contribution to the fields of higher education and student support.

Chapter 7

Conclusions

This chapter draws together the main findings of my research and considers the contribution (both academic and policy) that my study makes to the fields of higher learning and student support as well as indicating a future research agenda. Within the sections that follow I discuss the academic contribution that my research makes together with considering any policy contributions as they arise.

Main Contributions

My research questions are concerned with designing, and exploring the impact of, a personal and emotional development programme on students' experiences of transition, learning to learn and retention. As such the contribution of my work lies in providing experiential insight, which has an important role to play on a number of levels. Firstly, within the academic field of higher education, it increases understanding of the impact of interacting institutional and personal factors in shaping the experiences, responses, behaviour, attitudes and learning approaches of students in relation to their higher learning. Such understanding is useful in terms of designing appropriate support systems for students that more adequately meet their needs. Improved student support is understood within the literature as central to facilitating transition, supporting learning and ultimately promoting the retention of students within higher education.

The insights into students' experiences that my work provides may also have a wider policy contribution since they reveal the impact of the current higher education academic and political policy of widening access and increasing participation rates on the students themselves. Policy review frequently occurs at an institutional or macro level, but my study reveals something of the impact of this social equity policy at the micro or personal level. In this way it may provide policy-makers with the beginnings of an extra dimension of understanding when assessing and developing higher education policy.

Within my research I recognise that higher learning experiences are complex and influenced by a multiplicity of factors, some of which operate at an endogenous (internal or personal) level e.g. individual student characteristics, values and attitudes, whilst others exist at an exogenous (external or institutional) level e.g. the impact the higher education system itself and its wider socio-political context have on shaping these experiences. In my work I have attempted to encompass both these issues by integrating the development work into students' learning experience in situ and contemporaneously, thereby directly addressing both the personal and wider contextual issues as they impact on those experiences.

The nature of this complexity was informed by my literature review which encompassed these interacting areas including the fields of education, psychotherapy, psychology and sociology. As such I have also considered both aspects – the personal and contextual within the literature. The first stage of my literature review focused on the context of students' higher learning experiences and revealed that higher education is experiencing a period of change, with studies revealing that socio-political forces are reshaping it into a commercialised and competitive 'industry'. The steadfast political agenda remains committed to 50 per cent of young people attending higher education by 2010 and this thrust for greater social inclusion is resulting in increasing numbers of non-traditional students entering higher education.

The sector has therefore shifted from an elite to a mass system of education as universities (especially post 1992 institutions) admit more non-traditional students, creating a diverse current student demographic. However, the retention rates of these institutions have also been falling and recent evidence demonstrates that a significant proportion of those students who withdraw from their studies are classified as non-traditional. Some writers suggest that this is because of non-traditional students' lack of cultural capital – which distances them culturally from the curriculum, structure, practices and ethos of higher education - and that academic success may therefore be linked to a student's ability to undertake cultural adaptation.

Whilst widening access and increasing participation rates seek to improve social equity, efforts to achieve this by merely relaxing admission policies are clearly insufficient. Widening access therefore requires more than addressing the issue of

admission and the literature raises the need to adapt the structures and systems (including student support and development) within higher education, especially in relation to the issue of retaining non-traditional students. Failure to do this may insidiously undermine non-traditional students' chances of reaching their learning potential. Through the literature review I identified a first gap in the literature – i.e. the need for improved systems of student support, particularly in relation to the needs of non-traditional students.

The second phase of my literature review examined the nature of higher learning including consideration of the personal and emotional aspects of learning, which revealed an emphasis on cognition in terms of knowledge transfer and skills acquisition within higher education in comparison to the relatively neglected emotional component of learning. Whilst the importance of cognition is acknowledged, increasingly the significance of the personal and emotional dimensions of learning are being highlighted. Thus I identified a second gap within the literature – the lack of integration of emotions within higher education.

Other writers suggest that such under-emphasis on the emotional aspects within higher education may be compromising students' learning potential and insufficiently preparing them for the complex and dynamic working environment they face on graduation. My study appears to support this and indicates that some students interpret the largely cognitive focus which lacks an emotional component as a form of depersonalisation which may contribute to their failure to engage with their learning at a deep level. Such alienation may further impede students' learning by encouraging the adoption of mechanistic, surface approaches to learning. The literature demonstrates that such approaches utilise a basic form of learning conception (categorised A to C) which frames students' learning experiences as one of passive knowledge transfer - a product to be transferred from tutors to students - that is externally directed and assessed.

Further studies reveal that the integration of emotions and personal development into higher education may be beneficial to students in a wider sense, by enhancing their learning experiences - including those of transition and orientations towards retention. Including an emotional dimension into learning may therefore be helpful in creating

satisfying learning experiences that support deeper conceptions of learning that encourage engaged learning in a way that enables students to achieve their learning potential.

Whilst there is a small amount of existing research that supports the inclusion of emotions into higher education, little has been written about how best they might be integrated into the higher learning curriculum, or their impact on the learning experience. As such it remains a neglected dimension and studies of their development and effect remain largely absent within the higher learning literature. My research brings together the two identified gaps within the literature and seeks to use one (emotional and personal development) to satisfy the other (calls for improved student support), to better support students – especially non-traditional students – in relation to their transition, learning conception and retention within higher education.

The limited amount of work available in the area suggests that personal development may be an effective means of integrating emotions into higher education. Research studies within the field of psychotherapy support, in principle, the suitability and portability of the person-centred or humanistic ethos and principles as a possible basis for personal development that would support and improve higher learning.

In addition to the arguments within the literature that the integration of emotional and personal development supports higher learning in a generic sense, my analysis of further studies suggests that the current changes within the sector (notably massification) appear to accentuate the need for such development in order to facilitate the processes of student transition and retention. Furthermore, wider external changes, including the development of the knowledge economy which requires flexible, creative life-long learners, further strengthen the arguments that student development should be prioritised above a narrower remit of knowledge transfer and skills acquisition.

Building on this existing understanding, my research synthesises the principles of the person-centred approach with relevant ideas drawn from the areas of education and learning to create a programme of personal development that integrates an emotional dimension into higher education. In addition to drawing on existing knowledge, my

programme was created through an iterative and collaborative process undertaken with participating students in order to tailor it to their specific needs and foster control of the programme amongst them. Using a humanistic paradigm (person-centred) and small group discussions enabled me to give primacy to students' emotions. Integral aspects of the programme included the use of self-disclosure, experiential expression, reflection and interpretation of experiences to support meaningful learning development. Although the person-centred approach is traditionally associated with psychotherapeutic counselling it is well understood to be transferable into other areas including education. However, current research in this area is limited in that it falls short of addressing how such an approach could be practically used within higher education as a basis of student support and development. As such I have contributed to knowledge in this area by developing a conceptual model that attempts to integrate the person-centred approach into a system of student support that is relevant to the needs of contemporary students. My experience of doing this provides results that concur with the suggested portability and usefulness of the approach within the sphere of education outside of formal teaching arenas.

Within my study, early student experiences revealed that beginning a programme of higher education involves a period of considerable change and adaptation for students and that this transition phase is as much an emotional as well as an intellectual experience. The standard induction programme - the one-size-fits-all approach - was exposed by students as inadequate in meeting their needs. This finding is consistent with suggestions made in earlier studies which identified a need to offer meaningful and relevant support to students through this transition phase. However, my study builds on this identified need by revealing the particular and personal issues experienced by students during transition which included:

- The need to find personal meaning in their learning.
- Feelings of isolation and a failure to establish a sense of 'belonging' within the institution.
- A lack of understanding of the system of higher education.
- A failure to understand their role as a student and that of their tutors in their learning.

- Difficulty in establishing appropriate learning relationships with tutors and other students.
- Not knowing how to learn at the higher level.
- Struggling with low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence.
- Difficulties in overcoming personal barriers to learning.
- Problems in taking control of and responsibility for learning.

Through such insight I was able to identify a common thread from these early discussions with students in that, regardless of whether students felt optimistic and excited or fearful and anxious about coming to university, their experiential accounts of transition reveal the emotional nature of the experience. Obviously it involves practical issues, such as finding their way around campus, negotiating timetables, managing finances etc. but what appears to lie at the heart of the process is a mass of emotions, with students using emotional language to describe these experiences. My research therefore contributes to our understanding of the nature of the process of personal transition which is revealed to be complex involving change on a number of levels including practical, intellectual, social, personal and emotional adaptation.

From a policy perspective, most universities' respond to transition by providing factually-based information sessions or programmes designed to transfer a range of knowledge-based information to students and as such use a logical, positivist construction of an individual's reality. My research contributes to our understanding of higher education transition policy by exposing that this focus appears at odds with many aspects of the lived experience of transition by largely ignoring the emotional component of this change process. Whilst it is accepted that transition necessarily involves some degree of information exchange and can be both an exciting and positive experience it is also a period of rapid change. In common with all change processes it can also include negative experiences, responses and emotions and such difficulties are not necessarily based within the rational or intellectual confines of an individual but reside within the feeling, emotional or affective realms. Students were critical of the factual basis which creates a cognitive focus within existing induction programmes which fail to address the affective aspects of transition. Such an approach has consequences for students in that it resulted in some students feeling

that they did not have institutional permission (albeit perhaps unintentionally) to have these feelings within the existing framework which left them struggling with their fears and anxieties.

Existing approaches to transition may also fail to recognise that transition does not begin on the first day a student attends higher education. It begins long before, in the slow formation of attitudes, values, behaviour and expectations (the habitus) that individuals develop in response to their life experiences, family background and social circumstances (cultural capital). Bourdieu (2000) suggests that effective transition is concerned with a student's ability for cultural adaptation – i.e. their ability to quickly realise and respond to the new university situation they find themselves in, it is perhaps unsurprising then that non-traditional students in particular, who by their very nature have less experience of higher education, find this adaptation more difficult. My early discussions with students, particularly non-traditional students, concur with Bourdieu's understanding of the cultural distancing of non-traditional students from the dominant culture within higher education. Students within my study revealed uncertainties about the 'rules' of the higher education game and what was expected of them as higher learners. Whilst attending university for the first time is a new experience for all students, discussions with students provided some insight into the nature of these cultural disparities. Traditional students through their family, schooling, social and peer-group experiences (including friends and family members attending university, school discussions and visits, careers counselling etc.) were able to draw on these experiences to develop some degree of informed expectation of higher learning. In contrast, non-traditional students who have a different set of life experiences and circumstances, which may not have brought them into contact with the reality of university education, were less informed (and more insecure about) what higher learning involved. This disparity may have some responsibility for the higher rates of student withdrawal that exists amongst non-traditional students overall.

These findings are consistent with the literature in the area, however, Bourdieu invited researchers to develop his theoretical framework as a flexible interpretive tool for their own empirical findings: "The peculiar difficulty of sociology...is to produce a precise science of an imprecise, fuzzy, woolly reality. For this it is better that its concepts be polymorphic, supple and adaptable, rather than defined, calibrated and used rigidly" (Bourdieu and Waquant, 1992: 23). Nowotny (1981) undertook this challenge and extended Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital by developing the notion of emotional capital. Nowotny defines emotional capital as "...knowledge, contacts and relations as well as access to emotionally valued skills and assets, which hold within any social network characterised at least partly by affective times" (1981: 148). Others, including Allatt (1993) and Reay (2000) have further developed the notion of emotional capital, the latter doing so within the sphere of higher education. Within this educational context Reay (2000) defines emotional capital as the emotional resources an individual possesses to allow them to effectively manage aspects of their higher learning.

The academic contribution of my work within this area is that I build on the work of Nowotny (1981) and Reay (2000) by extending the concept of emotional capital through an examination of students' emotional relationship and involvement with their experience of higher education. What I am suggesting here is that the relationship between non-traditional students in higher education and their levels of emotional capital could provide a new way of understanding, managing and mitigating the current difficulties non-traditional students face in relation to transition, higher learning and retention. My findings contribute to current knowledge in this emerging area by developing a practical mechanism - the development programme - that seeks to support and develop students' emotional resources, i.e. promoting the development of emotional capital which enables students to better self-manage their higher learning experience.

An early aspect of this within my research, centred on open discussions of the way students felt about being at university. Interestingly, these discussions revealed that the cultural distancing of non-traditional students from the ethos and practices of higher education was something that students were aware of and frequently described

their perception of it using emotional language that articulated a 'lack of fit' or 'riskiness' between or for themselves within higher education.

Further exploration of this issue with students indicated how these self-perceptions have the potential to interfere with students' early engagement with their fellow students and higher learning and may contribute towards the development of alienated approaches or conceptions of learning amongst such students. My programme appears to have assisted participating students (especially non-traditional students) in overcoming some of these difficulties, by making them aware of their role at the outset, understanding its expectations and requirements, and taking action to master this role and thereby transform themselves into more successful students. The programme, acting as a translation device, appears important in bridging the expectation gap that may exist between students and their learning. Thus the conceptual model that I have developed contributes to knowledge in this field by responding to calls from Moxley *et al* that: "The basis of student educational support lies in a student's mastery of the role of the student. Thus, students need insight into and an understanding of what is expected of them and how to behave in a manner that produces successful educational outcomes" (2001:91). My research therefore attempts to satisfy this identified and explicit need to take an active approach to 'transforming' students into successful higher learners by developing Reay's (2000) notion of emotional capital within higher education.

My findings in this area also create policy implications since whilst widening access may have facilitated an influx of non-traditional students into some higher education institutions other aspects of its influence appear to exacerbate the issues of transition for some students. Discussions with students reveal that larger class sizes and a more heterogenous student community appear to erode areas of commonality between students, which may disrupt opportunities for students to develop strong, supportive relationships between each other. This can make the whole process of 'settling in' to university more complicated as the student population becomes more disparate and fragmented and some students may be left in positions of relative isolation. In addition, there is also a drive towards anonymity within the educational process - fuelled in part by the external scrutiny of the sector - and exacerbated by increasing class sizes and rising staff-to-student ratios leading to less time for personal contact

and the potential for depersonalisation of the learning experience. Thus the current context of higher education may be making it more difficult for students to seek out and receive a level of personal care and integrate themselves into higher education. The personal development programme created within my research sought to redress this balance by adding a personal dimension into the learning experience and providing students with an opportunity to share and explore their feelings with others in a safe environment. Feedback from participating students suggests that this was a beneficial aspect of the programme, providing them with a direct opportunity to build supportive relationships and networks with other students.

Current research in the area of student progression and retention is limited in that it tends to focus on demographic characteristics of student groups. My research contributes to this field by exploring the impact of personal factors on students' progression and retention. Within my research, discussions with students revealed that retention is a key consideration with many considering leaving higher education within a short period of arriving, almost as a facet of the transition process. Many students described experiencing acute and strong desires to leave higher education in these early stages and had difficulty in finding an outlet for these feelings within the existing support structure which frequently left them feeling inadequate and guilty about these feelings and pressurised to stay. Furthermore amongst the families of non-traditional students there is not a universal acceptance that having a child aspire to a university education is necessarily a positive thing. Non-traditional students particularly reveal that often the people closest to them offer the most opposition (ranging from disinterest to outright opposition) to their decision to undertake a university course and the most encouragement to leave!

Furthermore, my study contributes to our understanding of the student experience by revealing their perceived lack of discourse generally about their emotional and personal experiences in relation to their higher learning. Whilst students recognised that emotionally-focused discussions were not tacitly discouraged they were neither instigated nor encouraged by tutors, academic advisors or other support staff. Such emotional indifference was translated by students into a 'lack of caring' or a feeling of 'not being known'. The failure to address the emotional aspects of learning may in part be a reflection of the way in which the institutional habitus of higher education

has been developed over time – with a strong cognitive or intellectual focus that prizes the development of knowledge through stimulation of the intellect. If this is the case, it may expose a limitation within the scope of higher education since the growing body of literature indicates that cognitive development cannot be divorced from – moreover is enhanced by – the recognition and inclusion of affective and emotional aspects of learning. My findings suggest that including these emotional aspects may have a particularly important role to play in facilitating students' development of learning relationships with tutors, their peers and the higher education institution itself which in turn may support students' engagement with and connection to their studies. My study also begins to indicate that including the emotional aspects of learning may act as a grounding process for students within higher education, enabling them to engage in more developed conceptions of learning. In addition my findings also suggest that using emotional and personal development is not only valuable in creating a more fulfilling learning experience for students but is also important in supporting their longer-term retention within the institution.

My programme specifically encouraged emotional discussions and sought to support students in three key areas namely during transition, developing their ability to learn and supporting their retention. My understanding of its impacts in relation to these areas and other aspects, drawn from students' comments and feedback together with my observations, are summarised in Table 7.1 below. Here I have highlighted areas of experiential difference described by participating students which were absent or lacking in the accounts of non-participating students.

Table 7.1 Impact of the Personal Development Programme on Participating Students

Area of Consideration	Impact
Transition	• Provided an opportunity to openly discuss the systems and processes of higher learning enabling students to more quickly recognise and understand the rules of the game, i.e. supported their cultural adaptation. • Created a 'safe' place for students to share their feelings which

	broke down feelings of isolation and enabled students to engage and develop learning relationships with others. • Adopted a holistic approach to supporting transition - including the emotional aspects of this change process – which more realistically met the support needs of students. • Gave students permission to discuss their feelings openly, which dissipated immediate feelings of anxiety. • Allowed students to quickly feel valued within the institution and assisted them in feeling more known by themselves and others. • Helped to unlock the complexities of university culture, reducing the perception of personal risk.
Learning-to-learn	• Facilitated the dissemination, understanding and appropriate response to the higher learning 'rules'. This supported students in becoming active players in the higher learning game, rather than passive spectators. • Supported the development of realistic expectations of the role of students and tutors in the learning partnership. • As students developed a clearer understanding of what is actually involved in learning at a higher level this supported them in achieving a deeper conception of learning. • Allowed access to the ideas, experiences and abilities of other students, which stimulated their own abilities, as they became peer-mentors to each other. • Helped each other to develop practical skills e.g. IT skills. • Developed communication and listening skills and the ability to interact with others. • Developed ability to challenge and confront, to ask questions and clarify understanding. • Enabled students to develop friendships that extended into the classroom. • Directly challenged lower levels of learning conception.
Retention	• Provided a safe place to discuss feelings of withdrawing

	without fear of coercion or persuasion to stay. • Facilitated discussion of alternative courses of action. • Developing strong relationships with others in the group that enabled students to feel supported and encouraged and reduced feelings of anxiety. • Provided a 'social' setting so that students felt less alone and emotionally distant from others. • Personalised their university experience and reduced feelings of anonymity, assisting students to engage and attach to the university. • Allowed students to discuss their 'failures' and in so doing better understand their relevance and significance. • Supported the development of students' learning, which reduced their feelings of not 'fitting in'.
Group structure	• Developed supportive friendships. • Sharing experiences broke down feelings of isolation. • 'Normalised' feelings as they were validated by others. • Sharing the perspective of others led to greater tolerance and self-understanding. • Being with others and working together allowed students to develop a sense of 'fitting in' or belonging. • Created a sense of social inclusion and enabled students to make friends.
Person-centred orientation	• Gave students permission to talk which increased depth of discussion. • Developed reflective skills. • Created greater understanding of the influence of other's feelings and expectations of their own behaviour. • Supported greater self-awareness. • Students felt known, understood and cared about by the institution. • Allowing students to direct discussions facilitated the

	development of control and responsibility. • Built confidence and self-esteem which enabled more engaged learning behaviour to be exhibited.

Whilst the above table summaries some of the key impacts of the personal development programme it is important to remember that the experience of each individual within the group was different. The table summarises findings that were common across a number of student experiences but this should not imply that each student experienced each impact to the same extent.

Participating in the programme appears to have had a positive influence on its participants, all describing a number of benefits in terms of supporting their transition, learning and retention, with the statistics demonstrating that no participating student withdrew from university during their first year or subsequently. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of the programme I perceived was its group structure, with students repeatedly commenting on the therapeutic effect of discovering that others share similar difficulties and the importance of developing friendships with other students. The strength of these aspects of support cannot be underestimated and through them students became increasingly self-supporting, meeting outside of the formal development sessions in self-initiated and spontaneous meetings aimed at the continuation of the support and development of each other that they undertook within the sessions.

Despite these positive influences undertaking this work with students does involve a degree of time and emotional commitment on the part of the facilitator and it also requires a degree of training in order that both students and tutor are adequately supported. In addition during the early sessions I did require a degree of persistent to overcome students' apparent innate desire for tutors to lead, control and direct the sessions. In addition sensitivity is required in relation to managing the different personalities within the group. Some students are naturally talkative and will dominate discussions if allowed to. Others are much quieter and will say very little, if anything without the appropriate level of encouragement and support. This requires a

delicate balance and range of skills to draw some students in whilst developing the listening abilities of other more naturally chatty students. It is also important to realise that a silent student is not necessarily a passive one. Silence and active, engaged learning are not mutually exclusive as I realised through my struggles with Eli.

Overcoming students' understandable reservations about openly discussing their personal feelings with others was a further early difficulty. This again required a level of persistent encouragement combined with using self-disclosure as a way of setting the first and continuing example. It also has to be understood that personal development is an incremental process that occurs over periods of time. As such there is a time commitment involved in working with students over a number of months rather than in a front-end loaded intensive course. Also, within my research my decision to work with small groups brought a number of benefits in its own right. However, the approach could easily be modified to include slightly larger groups of students and thereby increase the number of students that could be supported in this way.

Despite these limitations I believe that my study contributes towards a deeper understanding of the experiences of current students and the role of emotional and personal development as a basis of student support (in terms of transition, learning and retention) within higher education. These experiential insights build on our existing knowledge of reported phenomenon such as cultural exclusion and widening access in a way that is useful in terms of developing 'better' student support and reviewing the impact of policy initiatives through consideration of the cutting edge of students' raw experiences.

This is important since the literature suggests that higher education remains based on middle-class values and expectations, and as such its dominant cultural and operational practices are more distant from the experiences of working class or non-traditional students. This greater cultural distance may make the processes of transition and developing higher learning abilities more complex for such students. The system of higher education may not, as yet, be recognising this as it continues to

work on the assumption that all students entering higher education somehow intrinsically 'know' how to study at the higher level - a largely unspoken and often misplaced expectation that students within higher education are capable of and will demonstrate autonomous or self-managed learning. However, the weight of this expectation is not accompanied by any direct guidance and support in making the transition into these higher learning patterns. Bannister, Hanson and Ottewill (2002:36) suggest that this can place "stresses and strains" on students. Therefore the assumption that students innately possess the knowledge of how to study appears spurious and there is a slow recognition that aiding students in their quest to become effectively reflective requires exposure of the myth that all students intrinsically know how to study.

This begins to raise some bigger challenges for the university education sector, as it draws into question the sustainability of a widening access agenda that places the burden and risk of adaptation at the door of the individual student. Universities may need to take a closer look at the impact their dominant cultures, systems, procedures and practices are having on efforts to widen participation. Whilst the insights gleaned within my research are derived from an 'assimilation' approach (Zepke and Leach: 2005) which centres on enabling students to 'fit into' the dominant and existing higher education culture, these experiential insights support the alternative, emerging and altogether more challenging discourse of 'adaptation' which looks to "develop ways in which an individual's identity is affirmed, honoured, and incorporated into the orgainsation's culture" (Tierney 2000:219). My findings are able to reveal something of the struggles and successes within the experiences of students which may make the nature of required institutional adaptation clearer.

My research therefore begins to raise a number of issues outside of the scope of this work, from both academic and policy perspectives. These include ways in which systemic cultural change within the university sector could be made to make higher education more accessible; the wider role of emotions within the classroom and curriculum itself; the development of my conceptual model of support to work with larger numbers of students, or to address different student needs and the need to continue to work towards creating a system of higher education that is both

meritocratic and holistic where student success is based on ability rather than cultural proximity. These issues may provide the basis for further research in the area.

To conclude my research this last section includes some final reflections upon completion of the study.

1. Possible tension between the focus on the experience and emotional responses of individual students and the group-focused methodology

My personal development work with students was undertaken within small groups. As such there may arise the potential for some tension between my focus on the experience and emotional responses of individual students on the one hand and this group-focussed methodology on the other. In order to properly reflect on and consider this tension it may be helpful to begin by recapping (see Chapter 4 for fuller discussion) on the reasons underlying my choice of this aspect of my methodology as follows:

- Maintenance of the humanity of participants.
- Use of reciprocity (sharing, giving and receiving).
- Development of companionship bonds.
- Recognition of the commonality of experiences.
- Validation of participants (allowing them to be heard and giving credibility to their experiences).
- Provision of a safe environment to share experiences and rehearse new feelings and behaviours.
- Mirror the social dimension intrinsic in higher learning.

It is important to realise that groups are used in many settings to achieve a variety of goals, some of which are consensual whilst others are individualistic. What appears significant in terms of whether collective or individual goals are prioritised is the approach taking within the groups.

My research is concerned with individuals, and the appropriateness of using a group-focussed methodology whilst working with individuals is well documented and supported within the literature (Brookfield 1986; Gibbs 1981; Rogers 1994 and Dart 1998). What these writers suggest is that using approaches (including a person-centred approach) within small groups can create particular conditions (as discussed in Chapter 4 e.g. a 'safe' environment) which strengthen an individual's ability to discuss and disclose aspects of the self.

The approach used within my research was person-centred with a strong emphasis being placed on disclosing and discussing the learning experience and feelings of individuals as opposed to seeking consensus and uniformity. My results appear to demonstrate that this approach was useful not only in terms of developing the self-understanding of the disclosing individual (by exploring their experiential perceptions) but also by enhancing the self-understanding of others in the group, students spoke of gaining insights into the experiences of others which caused these group members to reinterpret or re-evaluate their own experiences.

As such by embedding my research in a person-centred framework, which included its use within the groups, it appears that the potential tension between the individualistic needs of my research and the group-focussed methodology is mitigated.

2. Student heterogeneity

The discussion that has preceded leads me to an understanding that using small-groups within a person-centred framework preserves the uniqueness of individual participants. However, there is a further issue here that relates to the issue of individuality or heterogeneity amongst the student participants. Whilst my work concentrated on individuals, it did so in the bounded context of their higher education experiences. Whilst such students (in common with any individual) are unique, their higher education experience is not. My student participants attend the same institution, are enrolled on the same course, study the same subjects in the same classrooms with the same tutors at the same time and share in the same institutional

culture. As such, it is hardly surprising that sometimes participants' experiential descriptions were not unique – often describing experiences that some or all other student participants within the groups were or had experienced. Notwithstanding, what remains within these common experiences is the uniqueness of a particular individual's response, interpretation and feelings towards those shared experiences, i.e. their personal perception and adaptation to it. It is therefore important to be clear that commonality of experience and preserving the individual are not mutually exclusive within small group discussions.

This has relevance for my research, since what appears significant within my study is that although it focused on individuals, it did so in terms of exploring their individual and personal responses to the commencement of their higher education studies. This aspect was a common experience shared by all members of the group who were enrolled on and studying the same courses within the same degree programme. As such, whilst coming from different backgrounds with different experiences and dispositions, these students were all exposed to an identical higher learning experience in terms of the institutional habitus. In terms of such commonality, my understanding of students' individuality or heterogeneity is related to students' personal interpretation of and response to these shared elements. As such my group approach that is grounded in a person-centred framework enabled a wider discussion of shared and individual aspects. Working within this group framework it became clear that one's individuality is not subsumed by a small group environment – especially since as a group we decided that the groups' control and direction be a collaborative effort amongst participants and used it primarily as a vehicle to discuss the personal experiences and interpretations of individuals participating within that group.

As such I believe that using a group focus that is grounded in a person-centred framework enabled me to engage in fuller discussions of their student experiences some of which were unique and some of which were common aspects and thus focus more readily on the diverse range of students' perceptions and reactions to this shared higher learning experience. As such the focus of my work remained on individuals' interpretations, perceptions and responses to their experiences of being a university student – which was the area of commonality between them – rather than focusing on

the uniqueness of individuals *per se*. This approach provided an opportunity to discuss personal and shared experiences from an individual's perspective and as such preserved and explored the uniqueness of each participant.

Aside from the issues of individuality and commonality my choice to use groupwork mirrors the way in which students are taught within higher education – i.e. within groups. Undertaking the personal development work within groups created co-operative learning where powerful social and academic results were produced – developing positive interdependence with each other, improving face-to-face interaction, creating individual as well as group learning plus the development of interpersonal and small group skills. Groups provide the possibility of extending each person's understanding of his/her behaviour and thus empowers the individual to take control of otherwise automatic and unthinking reactions. More generally such human interaction is not only integral to learning and personal development work but also widely recognised as a valuable graduate skill in its own right within the business community.

3. The relationship between traditional and non-traditional students

My programme was initially conceived of to work with non-traditional students who, research demonstrates are more vulnerable to non-completion and may face more problematic transition issues given the fact that their experience of higher education may be somewhat restricted. However, as my research progressed it became clear that some of issues affected students regardless of this externally applied and perhaps arbitrary distinction between their traditional and non-traditional status. My findings indicate that feelings surrounding anonymity, undergoing rapid periods of personal change and adaptation, adjusting to the demands and expectations of higher learning (many of which are not articulated to students), issues surrounding student debt, low class contact hours, larger classes etc. were relevant to most students.

Reflecting on this and stepping outside of the distinction between traditional and non-traditional students used in my results analysis for a moment, it may be possible to reclassify students' feelings and perceptions in a different way. If some feelings are common across students perhaps a conclusion can be drawn that these feelings and

perceptions could be expected – e.g. initial uncertainty and anxiety stemming from the 'newness' of being at university, in an unfamiliar environment with unfamiliar people and systems etc. Other feelings either of traditional or non-traditional students would thus fall outside of 'normal' expectations.

Reflecting on such a classification whilst reviewing my findings it may be possible to identify certain issues that might fall into the 'expected' category, particularly initial feelings of anxiety about starting at university and being in an unfamiliar environment whilst not knowing anyone else. Within my original consideration of these issues (see Chapter 6, pages 213-214) I noted that one feature of these expected responses are that they are easily overcome merely by virtue of time passing and students gaining the necessary familiarity or via the provision of adequate information in the form of campus maps etc. As such they represent what I describe within Chapter 6 as cognitive transition issues, which are issues that can be overcome quite quickly and are those that are generally covered by existing (albeit arguably inadequate) induction and transition programmes. However, returning to and reflecting on my data further reveals that even within a category of expected response my findings suggest that there may be a diverse range of drivers of and reactions to such feelings amongst students. As such, in terms of understanding the students' experiences of higher learning it may not be helpful to work within an expected/unexpected classification, because to some extent this may be limiting not only in terms of the implication of a pre-existing and outside knowledge of their experience but also in terms of imposing a restrictive framework on the results analysis as 'expected' responses may be filtered out or dismissed due to their 'normalised' status without further exploration. Further analysis of my findings undertaken in Chapter 6 reveal the depth and complexity of emotional responses felt by students surrounding transition (e.g. feelings of not fitting in, risk exposure, being overwhelmed, struggling with oppositional family attitudes etc.). This appears to support a more open analysis of the results such as the one I undertook in order to more fully understand the depth and richness contained within my data.

Moreover, my research is predominantly concerned with non-traditional students whose cultural 'gap' is arguably wider than their traditional counterparts (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990 and Webb *et al* 2002). However a 'gap' exists to a lesser or

greater extent for all students, since most if not all students regardless of their background are embarking on an undergraduate programme of study by entering higher education for the first time. This impact on both traditional and non-traditional students is evidenced in part by research on non-completion which suggests that it is not just non-traditional students that leave university. My findings concur with this in that whilst non-traditional students nay have higher barriers in terms of 'lack of cultural fit' and subsequent levels of cultural risk exposure (Grenfell *et al* 1998), traditional students are not immune to the potential difficulties that may arise when entering higher education. This position appears to reinforce my selection of a more open form of data analysis that allowed me to both compare and contrast the experiences of traditional and non-traditional students.

4. Defining and classifying emotions

Emotion is the language of a person's internal state of being, normally based in or tied to their internal (physical) and external (social) sensory feeling. Emotion is where thought and physiology become entwined – where the self becomes inseparable from our individual perceptions of value and judgement towards ourselves and others in our emotional space.

Given their complex nature, it is unsurprising that a variety of definitions of emotions exist including:

> "An emotion is a mental state or process, which can be conscious or subconscious ...it attempts to balance and integrate various and often conflicting facts, experiences and concepts."
> http://encyclopedia.laborlawtalk.com/Emotions accessed 12/10/05

> "Emotions are complex mental states accompanied by intense feeling and which involve bodily changes of a widespread character."
> Koestler, A. (1967:226) *The ghost in the machine.* London: Hutchinson.

Emotions are therefore, subjective, psychological experiences, associated with a group of physiological reactions arising in response to some event. As such emotional experiences consist of thoughts, affective responses, feelings, cognitive responses, psychological responses and behavioural responses.

Because emotions lie at the heart of my research I considered attempting to classify the emotions that students perceived as a first stage of my data analysis. Within the literature, and moving beyond definitions of emotions, psychologists have attempted to offer general classifications of emotion – but as with the colour spectrum, distinguishing between them is to some extent subjective and largely depends on the level of precision that is required. One of the most influential classification approaches is Robert Plutchik's eight primary emotions - anger, fear, sadness, disgust, surprise, curiosity, acceptance and joy. Even within such broad classifications little in the way of objective consensus exists in respect of the classification or categorisation of emotions or emotional responses. Add to this the fact that even within a categorised emotion there are varying degrees of intensity arising from multiple response drivers, both conscious and subconscious it becomes very difficult to be precise about any particular individual's emotive perception let alone attempt to draw comparative benchmarks across individuals.

Furthermore, little has been written about the impact or role of emotion and higher learning. Indeed emotion and higher learning are rarely studied as linked phenomenon. Increasingly however, the literature is recognising the importance of emotions on higher learning and viewing them as inter-related, interacting, and interdependent. Beyond recognising their potential importance little research has been undertaken to explore the nature and impact of emotions on higher learning. What limited understanding there is the area appears to indicate that:

> "Emotion and learning in combination are powerful sources of meaning and direction, supporting or inhibiting individuals ... in their attempts to re-define reality and find their place in it." Antonacopulou *et al* (2001:435)

If one stops to consider what happens at an individual level for a student as they enter higher education – leaving home, friends and family; being and coping alone for

maybe the first time; enduring periods of rapid and sometimes confusing change; being isolated from familiar support networks etc. - it is hardly surprising that extreme demands are made on that individual's emotional life and learning ability during this transition phase. Given this, there may be some merit in persisting with an attempt to classify the emotions that students feel at this time, and one possible classification might be to separate students' emotions into those that could be reasonably anticipated and are probably short-term (lasting a few months) until students settle into higher education, and those that could not be reasonably expected and therefore present a need for support to assist students to deal with them.

Again the earlier arguments against such an approach, outlined when discussing 'expected' and 'unexpected' responses, that 'normalises' emotions in this way could be rehearsed here. Whilst this may have potential as an area for further study coming out of this research, my research was more concerned with exploring the personal experiences of traditional and non-traditional students from a subjective viewpoint. As such given the lack of understanding generally of emotions and higher learning, the lack of consensus concerning particular categories of emotions together with the exploratory nature of my research, I considered that any attempts to classify particular emotions within this particular research would be too narrow and prescriptive. As such I did not feel that it was helpful to attempt to categorise responses into discrete emotions as such a normalising approach would reduce the subjective depth of the collected data at this exploratory stage rather than enhance it. As such I selected a more open approach that allowed me to describe and interpret the feelings students described within the higher learning context of my research for the data analysis.

5. Accounting as a disciplinary site for the research

The students who participated within my research were enrolled on a particular course of undergraduate study – namely the BA (Hon) Accounting & Finance. As such it is important to reflect on the extent to which this particular disciplinary site chosen for the research might have coloured the data.

Any potential influence on the data of this disciplinary site probably comes from two main areas. The first being the nature of the student that is attracted to an accounting course, and the second being the influence of the programme of study itself on the students and their behaviour.

Taking the first of these - accountancy as a discipline, perhaps rather unfairly, has a reputation for being a technical, paper-based and dry subject area that requires attention to detail, spending long hours pouring over numeric data with little use for interpersonal skills. As such, accountants practicing the discipline have suffered with an unfair stereotype of being uninteresting and poor communicators. However, the reality of the situation is that whilst the modern accountancy profession does require high levels of technical competence it also recognises that it offers a professional service to clients within the business, commercial and financial sectors. As such it is beginning to prioritise interpersonal, people-management and communication skills – evidenced by recent changes to the syllabi of the entrance examinations to the professional accountancy bodies including the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants and the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales. These changes reflect the fact that accountancy is now a much more challenging and dynamic 21st Century profession that attracts a wide variety of students. As such it is my view that the initial nature of the student attracted to study such a course (and as such the data collected from such students) would not be dissimilar to those attracted to study any number of related (such as Marketing) or unrelated course (such as Psychology) both of which are demanding subject areas existing within a wider professional framework.

Furthermore, the students who participated in my research whilst being enrolled on the Accounting & Finance degree programme shared a common first year of study with all students on the Business Studies undergraduate programme, which includes students studying marketing, strategy, personnel management etc. This programme involved students studying a wide variety of courses on this common first year – ten in total – of which only two were specifically related to the accounting discipline. This broad brush approach to the first year of undergraduate study is again a pattern that is widely repeated across many undergraduate courses that begin in a more generalised way and develop subject specialisms as the course progresses over time.

In addition a large amount of the data I collected was undertaken within the first few months of students arriving at university – some of it before any teaching began.

As such I consider that the impact of the accounting discipline as the site chosen for the research is minimal – both in terms of the type of student attracted to the course and the nature of the material students were studying during the first year of the programme.

6. Parallels between the counselling and pedagogic relationships

My research has primarily focused on exploring the use of person-centred counselling as a means of providing a 'better' system of student support. However, during the course of my research I became aware that during these support sessions students were learning to become more self-aware and self-developed. This caused me to reflect on and draw out some parallels between the counselling relationship and the pedagogic relationship described below which may have implications for teaching practice within the university sector.

The counselling relationship within the person-centred approach lies at its therapeutic core. It uses a variety of 'core conditions' - specifically empathy, unconditional positive regard and congruence. These have been discussed in detail in Chapter 2, but here I will explore the parallels that I consider exist between these conditions in the therapeutic and pedagogic contexts.

The literature demonstrates that in a therapeutic context an empathic climate dissolves alienation, and provides a safe environment within which the client can explore their feelings. This is interesting, since the studies of Mann (2001) on learning in higher education point to alienation as a significant barrier to learning. She is critical of higher education's failure to engage students' being and desires in relation to their own learning and views them as having little control within the learning relationship as they merely 'go through the motions' of study in a superficial way, responding to the externally imposed directions of institutions and tutors. Stripped of personal meaning students remain unchanged or undeveloped as a consequence of their

learning. Rogers (1994) too recognised this alienation and described the futility of learning material that has no personal meaning – what he describes as learning from 'the neck up'!

Perhaps there is a need to rethink the nature of pedagogic relationships to include an explicit empathic understanding of students that is linked to their personal growth and development – such as that used in the counselling relationship.

During the course of my research I began to challenge the way in which I related to students within my classes. Spending time discussing personal aspects of students' learning made me more aware of their experiences of learning and the difficulties they faced both within and outside of the classroom. This gave me a greater level of understanding of them as individuals rather than as a student body and as such I became more empathic towards them within the classroom. From my own subjective perspective I felt that this did improve the quality of the learning interactions I experienced with students and was also reflected in the student assessments I received at the end of the teaching year. Students appeared to feel more at ease within my classes, asking more questions, being more open to challenging and expressing personal opinions of issues being discussed. This too was commented on in their end of year assessments of my teaching performance with several students commenting favourably on the open and accepting atmosphere we developed within the classroom.

The second pillar of the counselling relationship is that of UPR which is concerned with providing a non-judgmental attitude that is accepting, positive and respectful to the client and unreliant on them behaving or being a particular way. This engenders trust and builds a safe environment within which clients are free to explore and develop themselves. Again, it is easy to see the parallel here between the therapeutic and pedagogic relationship. Building a safe classroom environment where students feel free to challenge, discuss and explore issues as opposed to often being made to feel inferior to the tutor's authority and knowledge would better engage and develop students.

The third core condition within the therapeutic relationship is congruence which requires the therapist to be genuine – open and honest with the client, responding

authentically and not hiding behind a façade. This too appears to be what students need – an authentic and real relationship with their tutors that supports them to develop their learning - one that is constructively critical and challenges the student to take control and engage with their learning. Again this is something that I developed within my teaching over the period of my research. Where appropriate I encouraged a student-led agenda that fostered self-interpretation and promoted self-understanding. Here too the end-of-year student comments were very favourable.

Whilst these experiences and feedback are somewhat anecdotal there does appear to be a case for further research to explore more fully the ways (if any) in which the pedagogic relationship could be improved perhaps by using a more person-centred approach within the classroom. After all, the person-centred approach combines the arts of relating, listening and understanding, to promote personal growth, independence, autonomy and self-expression – which surely are critical components within and objectives of the pedagogic relationship too. Such recognition of the parallels between the counselling and pedagogic relationships may best be summarised by Rogers (1986:12) who stated that: "If the creation of an atmosphere of acceptance, understanding and respect is the most effective basis for facilitating the learning which is called therapy, then might it not also be the basis for the learning which is called education?"

If higher education is truly concerned with getting students actively involved in their learning, taking control and responsibility for it, empowering them to challenge and direct and become developed as people as well as learners (all of which are central features of person-centred therapy) perhaps there is a strong case to explore the incorporation of such a therapeutic approach into teaching and learning practice.

7. Further implications for policy and practice within the higher education sector

Earlier in this chapter and in the section above I have discussed some of the policy and practice implications of my work within the higher education sector specifically

in terms of developing induction programmes that extend beyond cognitive areas to include emotional aspects and developing teaching and learning practice to capitalise on the beneficial parallels between the counselling and pedagogic relationships.

However, I would like to conclude my research by considering some final policy and practice implications of my work.

Firstly, my research has explored some of the differences and similarities between traditional and non-traditional students especially in relation to the notion of cultural capital. My research concurs with the view that many non-traditional students are more culturally remote from the systems, practices and ethos of higher education than their traditional counterparts. The research on student retention indicates that non-traditional students are subsequently more vulnerable to non-completion and I have already discussed the idea that this is perhaps because non-traditional students are being recruited into a system that is neither prepared to receive them nor prepared to modify to accommodate them. Given the government's commitment to the continued encouragement of non-traditional entrants into higher education this disparity seems likely to continue. One possible short-term practical solution may be to create bespoke induction or transition programmes for non-traditional students that are tailored to their needs. Such programmes could move away from the short, sharp information-giving sessions they normally comprise and could be longer-lasting – perhaps over several weeks or months – and explicitly deal with the issues of cultural adaptation, together with a detailed explanation of rules of the higher education game in terms of detailing the practical expectations of the institution and their tutors on these students. Such transition programmes could incorporate discussions of emotional and personal aspects and support non-traditional students in developing their levels of emotional capital in terms of their levels of self-awareness of the habitus of higher education.

Secondly, there needs to be a wider recognition that non-traditional students can be different to traditional students and that these differences may require different support and different teaching approaches. Such recognition needs to occur at most levels within higher education, from support staff to lecturing staff to policy-makers and advisors. For example, one strong presumption that was revealed by my

discussions with students is that most lecturing staff appear to presume that every student intrinsically knows how to study. Many non-traditional students strongly disagreed with this presumption but felt that it was something that most lecturers had not even considered. If appropriate and effective pedagogic relationships are to be built between lecturers and students they need first to be aware of each others competencies and limitations. As such there may be some merit in providing front-line lecturing staff with some training so that they can be better informed about the needs and concerns of non-traditional students.

Thirdly, there needs to be some explicit recognition across all levels within higher education – but particularly amongst teaching staff – that learning is an emotional process not merely an intellectual one. This may be achieved by considering the need to develop teaching practice.

Lastly, and perhaps most problematic of all, the university sector has to begin to consider how it is to rise to the bigger challenge of sustaining the widening access agenda such that it no longer continues to place the burden and risk of adaptation at the door of the individual student. Dominant cultures, systems, procedures and practice all need to come in for some close scrutiny. Such widespread changes are difficult to effect and would only come about if members of the academic community, including its management and policy-makers are willing and open to becoming aware of and ultimately effecting such a change.

APPENDIX 1

Study Questionnaire

Please take a few minutes to fill in the following questionnaire.

Student Number: .....
Have you studied accountancy before? **YES/NO**
What grade did you achieve in GCSE English .....
What grade did you achieve in GCSE Maths .....

Please give details of your highest educational qualifications in the following table:

Qualification – e.g. A Level/HND	Subject(s)	Grade(s)	Date Taken

The following series of statements relate to your attitudes towards learning. Indicate, how much you agree/disagree with the statements by using the scale below:

1 Strongly agree
2 Agree
3 Neutral – neither agree nor disagree
4 Disagree
5 Strongly disagree

Don't spend more than a few seconds thinking about your responses – your first response is likely to be the most accurate. Indicate your response by circling the relevant number.

- I am looking forward to studying on this course 1 2 3 4 5
- I expect the lecturer to do most of the talking in class 1 2 3 4 5
- I find it easy to challenge ideas 1 2 3 4 5
- I am comfortable asking questions in class 1 2 3 4 5
- I often feel bored or 'switched-off' in classes 1 2 3 4 5
- I feel anxious about examinations 1 2 3 4 5
- I am here because I want to be here 1 2 3 4 5
- If I spend a lot of time on an assignment I expect to get a good grade 1 2 3 4 5
- I prefer to listen to others rather than speak in class 1 2 3 4 5
- I am expecting to do really well on this course 1 2 3 4 5
- I work hard at memorising facts and information 1 2 3 4 5
- I always accept the lecturers viewpoint on an issue 1 2 3 4 5
- New ideas make it harder for me to understand an issue 1 2 3 4 5

• I take lots of notes	1	2	3	4	5
• I am looking forward to studying	1	2	3	4	5
• I feel confident about voicing my opinions in class	1	2	3	4	5
• The opinions of others affect my thinking about issues	1	2	3	4	5
• I often attend classes without preparing for them	1	2	3	4	5
• I like it when the tutor provides handouts/summaries	1	2	3	4	5
• I prefer there to always be a right answer	1	2	3	4	5
• I often read around a subject	1	2	3	4	5
• I feel confident about participating in tutorials	1	2	3	4	5
• I like to keep the different subjects separate in my mind	1	2	3	4	5
• If I don't agree with a viewpoint I find it hard to accept it	1	2	3	4	5
• My opinions rarely disagree with that of my tutor	1	2	3	4	5
• When note-taking I write down all the facts/information	1	2	3	4	5
• I like to hear different views on a subject	1	2	3	4	5
• I prefer the tutor to work through activities with the class	1	2	3	4	5
• I like to link subjects together	1	2	3	4	5
• Understanding is more important than getting the answer right	1	2	3	4	5
• I like to copy down what the lecturer says	1	2	3	4	5
• My opinions are difficult to change	1	2	3	4	5
• I would feel comfortable disagreeing with the lecturer	1	2	3	4	5

Thank-you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire.

APPENDIX 2

Letter of Invitation to Participate in the Personal Development Programme

September 2000

Dear student

Re: Learning Support and Development

In addition to your timetabled classes this term we are offering you the opportunity to attend a weekly Learning Support and Development workshop.

The aim of the workshop is to provide an opportunity for you to share and discuss any areas of uncertainty, or issues that arise during the week. It will also enable you to think about ways in which you can develop your ability to learn and work towards resolving any difficulties that you might have with your studies.

The workshop will involve small group discussions with other students on the same course and will take place each week during the whole of the first term (12 weeks). Each workshop session will last for one hour each week and will be scheduled to fit in with your existing timetable.

Your participation is voluntary and the course does not carry with it any element of formal assessment, but is part of a wider research project that is being carried out within the department.

If you are interested in participating please could you contact Louise Gracia using the contact information below, or leave a message on the student noticeboard.

Thank you

Louise Gracia

Contact Details for Louise:

Room H303
Tel: 01443 482349
Email: lgracia@glam.ac.uk

APPENDIX 3

Participating Student Vignettes

Participant 1 – Eli (P1)

Eli is an 18 year-old male student who had arrived at university directly from school sixth form. He is an overseas student having come from Greece to study at Greenville. He is the oldest child within his family and has one other sibling – a younger sister – all of which run the family business at home in Greece. Eli described himself as having been 'sent' to university by his parents to gain a business qualification that would ultimately assist the family business. Eli is the first person from his close family to attend higher education and as such is carrying a considerable burden of family expectation – what he described as a 'duty to perform' – in terms of proving himself within this new academic arena. He is a reserved, well-mannered and respectful individual, who presents as having a shy and introverted character. He carries with him a strong sense of his cultural and religious identity. He is softly spoken, a little quiet and reluctant to speak within the group setting to begin. He is keenly aware of the financial sacrifices his parents are making in order for him to attend higher education, and is currently living within the campus accommodation provided by the university. He has been feeling quite isolated and alone during his first few days of being at university. He misses his home and his family and friends and is beginning to realise how much support they have been giving him – support that he has been taking for granted. He is realistic about his feelings and recognises that his feelings of separation and isolation are quite natural given that he has left his family, friends and country to study within the UK. He hopes that once his course of study starts in earnest he will soon get to know other people and feel a little more settled.

Participant 2 – Katy (P2)

Katy is female, and in common with Eli is another 18 year-old school-leaver, coming directly to university. She lives at home with her parents and her much younger

brother and drives herself the 12 miles to college each day. She presented as an outgoing, confident young woman, who was able to talk freely. She is currently working 5 evenings per week in a local social club and also has a busy social life outside of the university that she is planning to maintain. Her motivation to study at university is borne of her need for economic and financial independence, or as she phrased it: "There's no way I'm going to work on the line in the chocolate factory like my parents! I want more...a lot more." She demonstrated a strong drive and desire to improve her earnings potential in order to secure herself what she perceived as an increased standard of living and gain further independence. Again Katy was the first member of her immediate family to attend university.

She struck me initially as someone who may use her confident manner as a protective front and her free-talking approach perhaps was indicative of a degree of nervousness and apprehension. Katy felt familiar with the university environment having made several visits to the campus with her school over recent years.

Participant 3 – Rob (P3)

Rob is a 28 year old male, who had until recently been a successful Head Chef. Stress-related illness, which he felt had largely been caused by his occupation, had resulted in several stays in hospital. During this time he had had the opportunity to reflect on the pattern of his life which had led him to reconsider his current career. He had somewhat spontaneously decided to give up his chef's life (and what he considered to be an affluent lifestyle) and come to university to study accountancy. He was unclear as to how he had decided on studying accountancy and described that 'it had chosen him, rather than him choosing it'! He spoke about always regretting not going to university when he was younger and that he had seen his illness as a way of addressing this regret. Both his parents and his brother had attended university and his father in particular had been very displeased with Rob's decision not to go to university when he was younger. Rob was hoping that his current decision to go to university was in some way going to make up for his father's earlier disappointment and be a way of attaining his father's approval. Rob is currently living in rented accommodation, within the private sector, with 3 other male students (none of which

he knows) located a short distance form the university campus. He travels to Bristol each weekend to stay with his girlfriend of 2 years, and is optimistic about maintaining this relationship at a distance.

Rob presented as a very nervous individual, who demonstrated a good deal of anxiety, some of which was centred on 'fitting-in' as a mature student, and also concerning the radical change to his lifestyle. He was particularly anxious when considering his financial situation – leaving behind a lucrative career and effectively living off his savings. He was also anxious with respect to his recent bouts of nervous illness and the possibility of is re-occurrence. Despite these anxieties he was feeling very good about leaving the stress of his old life behind and looking forward to a new future.

Participant 4 – Dan (P4)

Dan is a nineteen-year-old male student, who has entered university direct from school, after having re-sat his 'A' levels. He lives locally in the family home with his parents and one younger brother who is still at school. Dan is not the first person from his family to attend university, since his dad, uncle and several of his cousins have attained degrees and other qualifications from higher education. He does not particularly feel under pressure to come to university, but described how it has always just been expected of him, and he hadn't really thought too much about what it was that he wanted. When the time came to apply, Dan preferred the thought of coming to university rather than getting himself a job. He found it difficult to share his initial thoughts and feelings with the group – describing an awkwardness – a feeling of self-consciousness and embarrassment. He appeared to not have considered much of the events of his life from his own perspective, and spoke a lot about expectations of him imposed from outside, but little about his own perspective. He seemed to lack some self-confidence and would not commit himself to feeling anything in particular – settled on feeling 'neutral'. I felt that this was an attempt to opt out of considering his feelings and did have the effect of distancing himself a little from the others in the group. He appeared to be a lot happier being on the edge of the group, observing from a safe distance, rather than getting involved within it.

Participant 5 – Milly (P5)

Milly is another 18-year-old female school-leaver, who has come directly to university on completion of her formal school education. She lives locally, within a neighbouring small valley community, again within the parental home and accesses public transport to make the short journey to university each day. Milly is the only child within her family and had decided to come to university after attaining better 'A' level results than she had expected. She described her parents as 'quietly supportive', and felt relieved that she did not perceive them as having pressurised or coerced her into coming to university. Milly very much felt that this had been her own decision. She felt that her self-confidence had had quite a boost after doing better at school than she had expected to do. She sees herself as someone who has average ability, but is prepared to make up for this through sheer hard work. She seemed very determined to do well at university.

She presented as a quiet, reserved person who was considered and deliberate in her approach and responses. She was the first person within her direct family to attend university and her parents were a little anxious about this. Milly did display a good degree of resolve and described herself in terms of her developing sense of self-confidence. She was feeling anxious about making new friends within university, and about developing relationships with academic tutors who she anticipated would be cold and distant. She felt that interpersonal skills was her weakest area and described herself as being 'not very good with people that I don't know'. To some extent this may be a result of growing up within a small community, where everyone is familiar with everyone else.

Participant 6 – Lucy (P6)

Lucy is a further 18-year-old school-leaver who has come direct from formal education to study at university. She is a Welsh student but has decided to move out of the family home which is approximately 35 miles from the university to live in the university campus accommodation. She was very quiet within the group and found it

very difficult to speak at any length within the group. She felt a little over-awed by the university environment and did not like the feeling of not knowing anyone else in the group. She was missing her home, her family and especially her school friends and was generally feeling unhappy about being in university. She was hoping that things were going to improve once the classes started in earnest and she would have the opportunity to speak to other students on the course. Lucy was clearly feeling apprehensive about the university experience, and had responded by becoming quite withdrawn. She was spending most of her time in her room on her own in the university halls and was finding it difficult to mix with the other students in the communal areas. She described how uncomfortable she was feeling and felt that somehow the situation was not fair on her. She recounted how every time she saw other students they always seemed to know each other and were laughing and joking together. She knew that it wasn't the case but had started to think that they were laughing at her. She was rationalising this feeling and understood that it came from her feelings of isolation and loneliness. She was clearly having difficulties adjusting to the many changes in her life (moving away from home and friends, coming to a new place, having to be independent) that were all happening at once. She did not feel that she was coping very well and this made her feel even more unhappy.

Participant 7 – Naz (P7)

Naz is an 18-year old school leaver who is the youngest of three brothers within his family. He lives at home with his extended family in a residential suburb of Cardiff. His family is of Asian descent, his parents having moved to the UK from Pakistan in the early 1970's. His parents are shopkeepers, and both his brothers have been or are still at University and Naz feels that he is following in his brothers' footsteps. Despite this feeling of following, he is clear that it was his decision and choice to come to university, but felt that this was largely to avoid having to begin work in the local family business – a large corner-shop and off-licence.

He describes himself as a 'very happy and optimistic person' who is keen to pursue a professional career in accountancy and therefore sees attaining a degree as a first step in achieving this goal. His main concern is his academic ability. He did not do as

well at his 'A' levels as he had expected and did not manage to gain a place at his first choice of university. Coming to Greenville was very much a 'fall back position'. He has a very strong sense of family and is content to live at home with his family whilst studying.

Participant 8 – Gail (P8)

Gail is a 35 year old married woman who is returning to higher education to retrain in the area of accountancy and finance. She lives in her own home with her husband and has recently given up a reasonably well-paid job in car sales (a position she has held for over 10 years) to return to full-time study. She had become frustrated with the 'macho' culture within her previous field of employment and felt that she was being passed over for promotion on gender grounds. Her unhappiness with this situation and a feeling of being tired of working in the area of sales prompted her decision to return to higher education. Gail did not have any regrets about leaving her former employment but she described herself as being 'wracked with insecurities' over her decision to come back to university. She was worried about her age being a barrier to getting along with the other students and was anxious that it would be difficult for her to make any friends along the way. She described her anxieties over returning to study after being away from it for so long. She had been to university when she left school and had graduated in 1985 with a humanities degree. She was very concerned that she would not remember how to study, write essays and generally get back into the swing of study. She was also concerned about the impact of her decision to begin studying again would have on her family life. Her husband was very supportive of her decision, but she realised that there would be financial and social sacrifices along the way.

She presented as someone who worried a great deal about all sorts of different eventualities, many of which were future orientated. She is clearly a capable, and strong-minded woman, but lacked an outward confidence in her own abilities and raised a lot of insecurities concerning her decision to return to university.

Participant 9 – Jess (P9)

Jess is a 25-year-old female student who lives locally in Cardiff. She rents a flat there with two of her close friends and has been living and working in Cardiff for the last 4 years. Jess has until recently been employed as a full-time fitness instructor in a city gym, but has decided that she wants to develop her career by studying for a professional degree. She has cut down her working hours to 15 per week, plus 1 day on the weekend. Jess is a confident, outgoing individual who is optimistic in her outlook on life. She feels that coming to university is a great opportunity for her and sees it as something she can integrate into her life, without it affecting it (in terms of her social life, employment and her domestic situation) too much. She has some concerns about the financial side of studying, but has resigned herself to the fact that she will need to take out a student loan to fund her studies. Jess feels really positive about being in university, seeing it as an opportunity to do something that she just would not have considered in her past. She described herself as being fairly disinterested in studying when she was at school, and lacked the motivation rather than the ability to be successful. She had left school at 16 and worked in a local office, training as a fitness instructor when she was 18, and has been working in this area ever since. As she has got older she has reconsidered the value of a university education and is keen to get a degree that will help her get a better job for herself in the future. Jess was not interested in studying what she considered to be anything that 'would not lead to a well-paid and respected job'. She saw accountancy as a well respected profession, and felt very motivated towards studying in this area.

Jess clearly is a confident person, with a lot of energy and enthusiasm. She seemed to only have considered the positive aspects of studying at university and I was left a little unsure as to how she would respond if she found herself under pressure, or if she stopped enjoying the course.

Participant 10 – Kim (P10)

Kim is an 18 year-old school leaver. Her family home is in the south of England, but was keen to 'get away from home' and as such accepted a place at Greenville. She

made a conscious decision to come to Greenville following her attendance at an open day held here in the previous Spring. She was impressed by the semi-rural setting and the strong campus environment where social, housing, learning and entertainment facilities are all available in a self-contained site. She was also struck by the friendly staff and atmosphere within the department and the structure of the course. As such she had clearly given a good degree of consideration to her decision to study at Greenville. She is currently choosing to live in campus accommodation which she feels gives her the right balance of independence and support. Although Kim is softly spoken and physically petite, she has a quiet self-confidence and has already begun to make friends within her accommodation block and attend self-defence classes in the gym. She has familiarised herself with most of the campus facilities and is very keen to begin her course of study and meet the other students.

She is the eldest child within her family and described how supportive her parents – both of whom have attended university - were of her decision to come to university.

Participant 11 – Annie (P11)

Annie is a 26-year-old single parent who lives alone with her 5-year-old daughter in Barry – a large South Wales town situated approximately 17 miles from the University of Greenville – and is reliant on public transport. She has lived and rented this property from the local Council for the last 2 years, since her separation and subsequent divorce from her husband. Annie has wanted to pursue an undergraduate programme of study for the last 6 years, but her family responsibilities have prevented her from doing so. Her daughter has recently begun full-time education and as such Annie now feels that she has the time and relative freedom to be able to return to full-time education. Her mother lives near Annie and has agreed to support Annie's return to education by helping her with some of her childcare responsibilities.

Annie is hoping to continue her part-time evening job where she works behind the bar of a local pub, 3 evenings per week, but is going to 'see how it goes'. She is concerned about the financial implications of her decision to study full-time at university. She is not comfortable with running up a large level of student debt and

hopes that she will be able to keep such borrowing to a minimum. She is also concerned about how other students will view her as a single-mother, and where she will 'fit in'. She also has some concerns that it has been over 8 years since she was involved in any form of formal education and is anxious as to whether she will have forgotten how to study, write essays, take lecture notes and pass examinations.

She has a strong extrovert personality, is very lively and talkative and demonstrates a good level of self-awareness.

Appendix 4

Overview of Categories of Results Discussion of Chapter 6

1 The Process of Transition

- Initial perceptions and managing change
- Impact of family attitudes
- Sensing loss
- The perception of difference
- Expectations gap

2 Learning to Learn

- Learner development scores
- Learning risk
- Assignment anxiety
- Impact of information technology
- Learning conception
- Learning relationship with tutors
- Higher learning context and the social aspects of learning
- Changing behaviours

3 Retention

- Early feelings of leaving
- Analysis of withdrawn students

4 Reflections on the Personal Development Programme

- Feelings focus and group participation
- Persuading students to take control

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